



NEW LINE CINEMA  
A Time Warner Company

# FINAL DESTINATION 3

A NOVELIZATION BY CHRISTA FAUST

BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE

WRITTEN BY GLEN MORGAN & JAMES WONG

BASED ON CHARACTERS CREATED BY JEFFREY REDDICK

# ONE

The wide, tree shaded lunch quad of McKinley High School was buzzing with excitement over the big senior trip to Red River Adventure Park, but Wendy Christensen's mind was on other things. She was a serious, quiet girl with long, wavy brown hair that tumbled over her eyes in soft, tousled bangs, and fierce, driven intensity in her large, dark eyes.

She was quite beautiful, but didn't seem to think twice about that. Unlike many of her classmates, who seemed to spend every waking hour lost in girly, Cosmo angst, obsessing over their weight, Wonderbras, the season's new make-up shades and most importantly keeping the attention of boys at all costs, Wendy gave very little thought to her appearance. Her body, beneath her neat and practical clothing, was naturally slender, but well toned and fit, not because she worried about conforming to the TV standard of emaciated perfection, but because she needed her mile long morning run to help clear her mind and get her focused for her day. Her boyfriend, Jason Wise, often teased her about being too serious. A control freak, he called her. She guessed he was probably right, but she didn't really see what was wrong with wanting to stay in control of her life. So many people just tumbled senselessly through their chaotic existence with no goals and no plans, and then seemed so shocked when things inevitably went wrong.

Besides, Wendy knew that in spite of his teasing, Jason secretly liked her strong will and cool head. In many ways, he was like a bad little boy who really wanted to be taken in hand and told what to do. Tall and handsome, with a mobile and expressive face, Jason was a popular, well-respected jock who could have had his pick of the McKinley litter, but he chose Wendy. Even knowing she was a virgin and intended to stay that way, he wooed her for months with a kind of chivalrous determination until he finally won her over. He said he loved her, and she was pretty sure that she loved him too, but things were complicated and getting more complicated every day. She had just gotten her acceptance letter from Yale.

Jason had applied and been accepted to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas with a full athletic scholarship. Physical distance aside, those two schools might as well have been on different planets. Wendy was headed for academic hardball, intense competition and eventually a prestigious degree in law. Jason was headed for beer bongs and Jell-O shooters, and sorority sluts majoring in fellatio. Wendy was far too practical to pretend that he would stay faithful during their long separations, and she knew that she would be far too caught up in her new classes to worry about the drama and hassles of maintaining a long distance relationship. The only way to maintain control of the situation would be to end it, but sitting there, snuggled close between his long, muscular legs on a cement bench in the McKinley lunch quad, Wendy felt a wave of warm, melancholy love for him. It felt almost like prescient nostalgia, as if she were visiting some beloved place from her childhood that would soon be closing its doors for good. She just wanted to enjoy what they had while it lasted.

Leaning back against his chest, she spontaneously decided that she wanted to go all the way with him. She had always figured it would be best to wait, but didn't have any specific goal, like marriage or a certain age, in mind. She always told herself she would just know when she was ready. It would be good with him and she knew that. She trusted him, and trust for her had never been easy to come by. It would be a long time before she was going to be able to find the time to build up that level of trust with anyone again. She didn't want to wind up a thirty year-old virgin. Besides, it was nearly criminal to let that fine, athletic body of his go to waste. While many girls only wanted to give up their virginity in a relationship they imagined would last forever, it seemed to Wendy to be a perfect way to say goodbye.

"What are you thinking about, Wednesday?" Jason asked.

Wendy tilted her head back and smiled up into Jason's handsome, bemused face. "Your mom working the night shift tonight?" she asked.

Jason's single mom was a nurse and often worked odd hours. If she was on nights, Wendy and Jason could be alone until six am.

"She's been on nights all week," Jason replied. "Why?"

Wendy turned around on the bench until she faced him, and looked up into his questioning eyes. She leaned in and kissed him.

He responded instantly to her unexpected ardor, pulling her close and kissing her back with urgent strength. She put a hand on his warm chest and pushed him gently back.

"After the trip to Red River tonight," she said. "I'll go check in for curfew and then sneak back out. Meet me around the corner and we can go back to your house."

"Wendy," Jason said, eyes wide. "You mean...?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind?" He shook his head. "Are you kidding?"

His face was so open and full of love and desire that she felt bad for being so casual about the ultimate demise of their relationship. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe they could find a way to make it work.

He kissed her again, harder this time, hands up under her hair, and nearly ready to do it right then and there.

"Hey," she said softly, breaking the kiss again. "Take it easy, tiger. There'll be plenty of time for that, and more, later tonight."

He glanced around, then reached down and adjusted himself with a comical look of torment.

"At this rate," he said, "I don't know if I'm gonna survive that long."

"Self control, Jason," Wendy replied with a smirk. "It's all about self control."

He laughed and then his face went suddenly serious. "I love you so much, Wendy," he said.

"I know," Wendy said. "I love you, too, Jay."

"Listen," he said. "Maybe it's not too late for me to..." He paused, eyes searching hers. "...Apply somewhere closer to Yale. We could find a place together off campus, or something."

Wendy put a finger to his lips. "Don't worry about that now," she said.

He kissed her again.

"Dude! UNLV, dude!"

Jason pulled away from Wendy and they both looked up. Jason's best friend Kevin Fischer was standing over them with his girlfriend Carrie Dreyer in tow. Kevin wore a UNLV T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, revealing his bulky, muscular arms. He was everything about jocks that Jason was not. Everything Wendy didn't like: loud, boastful, always making crude jokes and dirty comments. Jason said he wasn't like that all the time, that he was really intelligent and thoughtful if you got to know him, but if that was true, he hid it from Wendy pretty well. He seemed to know everything on earth about bad action movies, sports and porn, but little else. He and Jason had been best friends since elementary school and they had this complex secret language made up of action movie references and bizarre rhymes, and in-jokes that made no sense to anyone but them. Wendy always hated the way that Jason seemed to regress to Kevin's level of fart noises and tit jokes whenever the two of them were together. Kevin might be a secret genius, but she still didn't like having him around.

Kevin had a hand up for a high five, and Jason slapped it.

"Yeah, man," said Jason. "UNLV. You bet."

"What's with you, dude?" Kevin asked, frowning at Jason's less than gung ho reply. "You're not wussing out on me now, are you?"

Jason shook his head. "No way, dude."

"Number one party school in the US of A," Kevin crowed. "I'm talking double bad, flying ninja, Foxy Brown, power parties, J-dog!"

Kevin performed a series of comical faux karate chops, complete with high pitched noises that were meant to sound either like Bruce Lee or a pissed-off chicken. Jason shot an embarrassed glance at Wendy.

"Right on, K-dog," Jason said.

"Man, I can't wait to get there!" Kevin said. "Wish I'd signed up to start in the summer. You heard about those awesome houseboat parties they have on Lake Mead? Dude, think 'Thunder in Paradise,' but, like, with beer!"

"That's all you, Hurricane," Jason said quietly, his heart not entirely in the banter. "I'd get sea-sick, even without the beer."

"But dude!" Kevin replied. "It'll be like shark jumping with Carol Alt in a bikini, multiplied by nine million."

Carrie shot Wendy a pained glance while their boyfriends' unfathomable exchange continued. Carrie was a cute redhead, who Wendy always thought would look a lot cuter if she didn't try so hard to be pop star sexy all the time. She wore way too much make-up, gooey lip gloss an inch thick, and purple sparkle eye shadow frosting her wide blue eyes. She was dressed in a microscopic white halter top that didn't do a thing to hide her braless breasts, and the waist of her pink hip hugger cords was a good six inches below her pierced belly button.

Kevin eventually plopped down on the bench and pulled Carrie down on his knee. She threw an arm around his neck.

"So, we're still on for tonight, right?" Kevin asked. "You still picking us up?"

Jason nodded. "Yeah, six o'clock, on the dot," he said. "We'll be there."

"This Senior Night trip is going to rock," Kevin said. "We're taking Red River Park like Pelham One Two Three! You and me are gonna ride Devil's Flight ten times in a row, J-dog. Ten times."

"Til we puke, Duke!" Jason slapped Kevin's hand again, enthusiastic once more now that they were back on a safer subject than UNLV and Jason's imminent separation from Wendy.

Wendy rolled her eyes. "Why would anybody want to do something that made them puke?" she asked.

Jason and Kevin exchanged a sly look and laughed. Jason poked Wendy in the ribs.

"You're going."

Wendy scootched away from him. "I don't like roller coasters," she said.

"Everybody says that before they get on one," said Kevin. "Then they want to ride it again and again. Just like my dick."

He bounced Carrie up and down on his knee like a little girl getting a horsy ride, and she slapped his thigh, giggling.

"Well, I don't like them," Wendy repeated, ignoring Kevin's lewd comment.

"Aw, come on, Wendy," Jason said. "You gotta go. If only so I can buy the picture of your face they take on that last drop. I'd pay a billion dollars to see that."

"Oh," said Wendy. "That reminds me. I have to remember to bring the camera so I can take a few more pictures for the yearbook."

"I thought the deadline for the yearbook was past already," Jason said.

"Amy Hauer dropped the ball yet again," Wendy replied. "She never delivered her photos of the drama club's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so of course I have to swing in on a vine and save the day, as usual. If they'd just given it to me in the first place instead of trusting that flaky pot head, there wouldn't have been any problems."

"Aw, Wendy," Jason groaned. "Can't you leave the damn camera at home, just this once? Every time we do anything, I end up sitting around half the time while you take pictures."

"I promised Mr Smith I would do it. I can't just flake out on him now. I'd be no better than Amy. Besides, don't you want your high school memories immortalized?"

Jason shook his head and gave her a wry look. "Yeah," he said. "But you're so busy recording other people's memories, you might forget to have any of your own."

"We'll have plenty of memories," she said, giving him a significant smirk. "I promise."

He flushed and grinned.

Kevin stood up suddenly, picking Carrie up with easy strength, then setting her down on her tiny, high heeled shoes. She giggled. She did that a lot.

"All right, lovebirds," he said. "We gotta jet. We're late for skipping Mrs Lockler's social studies class, but we'll see you at six, right?"

"Six," Jason said. "Right."

They touched knuckles, and Kevin and Carrie sauntered away, Kevin's heavy arm draped over her shoulders like a possessive python.

Jason turned back to Wendy. "Now," he said, reaching for her. "Where were we?"

"Late for class," said Wendy, smirking and turning to gather her books.

"Aw, come on, Wednesday. There's only two weeks left of school. Nothing matters now. Let's skip, like Kev and Carrie."

"It matters to me. And we'll have all night, right?"

"Yeah." He looked down and took her hand. "Right."

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"Hey, Wendy. Shoot this for the yearbook."

Wendy looked around. In the back seat of Jason's black Expedition, Kevin was pulling Carrie's T-shirt up, exposing her sheer, turquoise lace bra. Carrie's T-shirt was identical to the ones they all wore; white and cheaply made, it read "I survived DEVIL'S FLIGHT! McKinley High School—Class of '05—Grad Night." Wendy couldn't help but find it a bit presumptuous to wear a shirt claiming to have survived something when they hadn't even gotten there yet. But the whole class had the shirts, and she couldn't help but succumb to the peer pressure to wear it, in spite of the fact that she had no intention of riding the stupid roller coaster.

Carrie was slapping at Kevin's head and struggling to get away.

"Kevin, stop it," she cried. "You're such an asshole."

Wendy rolled her eyes and looked away. At least Carrie was wearing a bra tonight.

"Real mature, Kevin," Wendy said.

Kevin retreated to the far side of the back seat, fending off Carrie's slaps, laughing and yelping.

"Aw, come on!" he said. "You want people to buy the yearbook, don't you? You gotta put in the good stuff."

"Carrie?" Wendy asked. "When is your birthday?"

"July eighteenth," Carrie said. "Why?"

"Because," Wendy said, "unless Kevin plans to bail me out of jail for taking dirty photographs of a minor, I think I'd rather wait until July eighteenth to photograph your breasts, if it's all the same to you."

"Great, it's a date," Kevin said. "I'll bend her over the birthday cake and really give you something to take pictures of."

Jason laughed. "Dude, you are such a perv," he said, but he didn't sound all that mad. He signaled left and slipped into the fast lane. They were on the way to Red River Park. The fat sun was bleeding orange into the sunset clouds.

"Come on, J-Dog," Kevin said. "I'm counting on your help for the DP scene."

"Jesus," Wendy said, disgusted.

"Hey, man," Jason said with wide, mock-solemn eyes. "I'm here for you. Anything for a friend."

Wendy shot Jason a look. "I swear," she said. "Get the two of you together and you act like a couple of juvenile idiots. I shudder to think what atrocities against human dignity will take place when you two are off on planet UNLV together for four years."

"Nothing bad's going to happen, babe," Jason replied. "We like to have fun, that's all. We know when to be cool."

"Hey," said Kevin. "We're cool all the time. Cool as the other side of the pillow."

"You bet," Jason said. "Too cool for school."

They exchanged hand slaps over the seat.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Wendy said.

She looked back at Carrie, ready to change the subject. "So," she said. "Speaking of school, where are you going to college, Carrie?"

"Me?" said Carrie, surprised. "I... I'm not."

"Really?" Wendy was suddenly embarrassed. It never occurred to her that someone she knew wasn't going to go to college. Had Carrie screwed up her SATS? Was she too poor? Wendy didn't really know very much about the girl. She had been going out with Kevin for a while, but they always went to those awful, jock, keg parties that Wendy refused to attend with Jason, so she had never really had a chance to get to know the girl.

Kevin put an arm around Carrie. "Carrie doesn't need to go to college," he said. "She's gonna be working in her dad's business. She'll be richer than all of us someday."

"Oh really?" said Wendy, relieved to be able to escape her embarrassment. "What does your dad do?"

"He installs swimming pools and spas," said Carrie. "It's no big deal."

"It is too," said Kevin. "Dreyer Pools has put in every pool and spa in this town. They got a contract with Smithson Homes, and those guys built every development in the valley."

"Dreyer Pools put in our pool," said Wendy. "Wow, that's cool."

"Yeah," said Carrie, embarrassed. "But I'm only gonna be the secretary. Just filing and stuff."

"And someday you'll take over and be the big boss lady," said Kevin. He gave her a squeeze. "Don't be so down on yourself all the time, kiddo."

"Well," she said. "You guys are going to college."

"Yeah right," Kevin laughed. "Me and Jay, we go to UNLV, try to get scouted by the NFL, play a little semi-pro ball if we're lucky, don't make the cut for the big team, and end up selling insurance because we spent four years partying and flunked out of Business 101. College ain't no guarantee, Carrie, trust me. You're going to do better than either of us."

Wendy looked at Kevin, surprised. She'd never heard him sound so insightful, so grown up. Maybe Jason was right about his hidden depths. She never would have guessed he had the brains to think past tomorrow, let alone four years from now.

Suddenly Kevin threw himself forward in his seat and pointed out the front window. "Dude! There it is, Red River. I can see Devil's Flight from here. Ten times, J-dog." He smacked Jason on the shoulder. "Ten times. You and me. 'Till we puke!"

"You got it, K-dog," said Jason. "'Till we puke."

They slapped hands again.

Wendy shook her head. Grown up? What had she been thinking? Who could ever mistake this Cro-Magnon for a deep thinker? It must have been a fluke. She looked forward. Ahead, on the horizon, Red River Park rose to the left of the highway. Silhouetted in the last red glow of the setting sun, it was as crimson as its name. Painful red highlights glinted off the girders and roofs of the rides and pavilions,

blinding her. Above them all towered Devil's Flight, the multi-loop roller coaster that was the park's premier ride. It seemed coiled like a cobra, ready to spring.

Wendy shivered. Two red lights at its head looked like eyes. It seemed to be looking right at her.

# TWO

Red River Adventure Park had started many years ago as a humble fruit stand by the side of the Red River Apple Orchard. Soon, the family who owned the orchard had added a general store, then a restaurant, and then a merry-go-round, anything to lure people to come in and buy the apples, apple cider, apple pies, apple sauce and candied apples that were still the family's primary business. But in the Fifties, people started coming just for the merry-go-round, and the family realized that if they had enough rides and entertainment they could build a motel and charge people to stay overnight.

Soon, the merry-go-round was joined by a Ferris wheel, a tilt-a-whirl, a ghost train and a roller coaster, as well as the usual midway huckster games like clown shoots, ring tosses, dart throws, string pulls and all their shady cousins.

In the Eighties, with the advent of the super theme parks like Six Flags, Disneyland and Raging Waters, Red River lost a lot of its business. Its old, wooden boneshakers and merry mixers couldn't compete with the sleek, computer-designed thrill rides of the other parks. After a decade of steady decline, the family decided to spend the money and go head to head with the other parks by building some high tech thrill rides of their own. To give them an edge with teenage boys, the most important theme park demographic, they did their best to make their rides the scariest, most dangerous-appearing attractions in the area.

Down came the pastel orange and turquoise flags, the paintings of flowers and apples and honeybees. Away went the cute farm animal cartoon characters that greeted families as they entered the park. Now the entrance to the park was framed in flames and devils' heads. New rides like High Dive and Last Ride and Devil's Flight were built. Old rides like the Apple Crate Express and the Spook House were renamed Bonebreaker and Zombie Apocalypse. But new rides were expensive, and took months to build, so a lot of the old attractions were still there, and the midway still had an old time carnival feel. The ring tosses and other "games of skill" were still doing booming

business in the shadow of the curving steel skeletons of the modern thrill monsters.

Wendy and Carrie stood at the foot of one of these monsters, in the lurid orange glow of a warm spring night, the colorfully painted tarmac around them spotted with black dots of discarded chewing gum. Drifts of candy wrappers and paper cups danced and spun in the gentle evening breeze winding between the rides. Screaming, laughing high school seniors ran all around them. Almost all of them were wearing the T-shirts that read: "I survived DEVIL'S FLIGHT! McKinley High School—Class of '05—Grad Night", just like Wendy and Carrie.

Wendy had paired her DEVIL'S FLIGHT T-shirt with simple jeans and pink low top Converse sneakers. Carrie had slashed the ribbing from the neck of her shirt, cutting it into a deep, cleavage revealing V, and then knotted the bottom tight in the small of her back so it hugged her abundant curves and tiny waist and ended just above the gaudy, dangling, crystal chandelier hanging from her navel ring. Below, she wore a skimpy pleated denim miniskirt and cork wedge heels that must have been killing her feet. The two girls could not have looked less alike if they had planned it.

"Can you see them?" Carrie asked, squinting and straining her neck.

"I'm looking," Wendy replied.

Wendy looked at the image of the ride in the screen on the back of the school's brand new Sony Cyber-Shot digital camera, as the camera struggled to find something to focus on in the ever changing and uncertain light. The ride was the High Dive, a thick, fifty-foot, purple column ringed by a circular gondola. There were forty seats on the bright yellow gondola, all facing out, so that the riders that sat in it looked out over the park. At the top of the column the words HIGH DIVE were picked out in rippling red, yellow and purple neon. They flashed on and off. HIGH DIVE! HIGH DIVE! HIGH DIVE!

At the moment, the gondola was inching up the column on hydraulics, getting close to the top. Somewhere among all the people strapped into the gondola's seats were Jason and Kevin, but she was having trouble finding them. There was too much light and motion

and noise. A kid in a huge, goofy jester's hat bumped her elbow as he ran by with his friends. She refocused. She still couldn't find them. Maybe they were around the other side.

Just then she saw two hands slapping in a high-five. She swung the camera back. There they were! She had them framed now—Jason and Kevin, grinning like monkeys, and looking a little more frightened than either of them would probably care to admit. The gondola was still slowly climbing.

"There they are!" she said.

"Where?" asked Carrie.

"Right above us," Wendy answered. "Right in the center."

Wendy moved her camera with the gondola, waiting for it to stop. The two boys gripped the padded shoulder restraints and looked out toward the horizon. Jason pointed at something. They were so high above her that their knees almost obscured their faces, and the flashing sign above them seemed to be coming out of their heads. The gondola stopped with a sudden jolt, and Jason and Kevin's eyes widened in fear. Perfect. That was the perfect picture. She squeezed down on the shutter button, but just as she did, with a crack like gunshot, the catch that held the gondola in place released and it dropped like a stone.

The gondola plunged down the column in freefall, silent except for the giddy screams of the riders which dopplered up in pitch in Wendy's ears as eight tons of plastic and steel raced down at her. Finally, just when it seemed impossible that it could stop in time and it would surely smash to pieces on the hard concrete at its base, hydraulic brakes engaged and slowed it to a swift but amazingly gentle stop. Relieved shouting and laughing rose over the hiss of decompressing pistons as the gondola settled into its cradle. The attendants came forward to release the restraints and help people out of their seats.

"Did you get it?" asked Carrie.

"I don't know," Wendy replied. "I hope so."

Wendy fumbled at the buttons on the back of the camera, trying to retrieve the shot she had just taken. The camera was the property of the yearbook staff, and this was Wendy's first time using it. They had

finally replaced the crotchety old film camera with this fancy new digital one, which was cool, but Wendy wasn't used to it yet. She hadn't completely figured out all the functions. There it was. Archives. She used the left and right arrows to flip through the pictures she'd taken so far, and squinted at the digital screen. Her face fell. The camera had gone off a second too late. The gondola had already dropped. Jason and Kevin and the other riders were just smears of color and reflection at the bottom of the frame.

"Oh, phooey," she said.

"Phooey?" asked Carrie, clearly amused by the G-rated mildness of Wendy's exclamation.

"Yeah. Phooey," Wendy repeated. "I missed them. They're all blurry."

She sighed and started to let the camera dangle from the strap around her neck when she paused and looked at the screen again, frowning. That was weird. The only thing in focus in the picture was the sign at the top of the ride. But it didn't say High Dive. The V was inexplicably unlit. It said: "HIGH DI E!" High Die. She looked up at the sign. All the letters were lit now. Well, actually, they were flashing on and off. But they were all working. The shiver she had felt earlier in Jason's Expedition, when she had first looked at the ominous shape of the roller coaster, returned to her.

Then she laughed. She was just being silly. The lights were probably on some kind of cycle. They probably all flashed on and off, one by one, every few minutes or so.

Carrie tried to look over her shoulder. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

Wendy let the camera drop, embarrassed by her silly, groundless anxiety.

"Nothing. Nothing," Wendy said. "Just getting rid of the lame picture."

"Woo!" Kevin cried. "That was awesome."

"Totally fucking awesome," Jason echoed.

Wendy looked up. Jason and Kevin were weaving toward the girls like drunk sailors, grins a mile wide plastered across their faces.

"Express elevator to hell," Kevin said, turning to Jason and slapping him on the chest.

"Going DOWN!" they cried in unison.

Jason threw his arm around Wendy. "Man, I can't believe you didn't go on that," he said. "It was incredible. Whoosh! Like, my stomach came out of my mouth."

"I told you," Wendy said, frowning. "I don't like thrill rides. Why would I want my stomach to come out of my mouth? That's disgusting."

"My lunch almost came out of my mouth," Kevin said, laughing.

"That's even more disgusting," Carrie said. "I'm glad I stayed down here."

"No way," Kevin said as the four friends started up the midway. "It was totally intense. Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like to, like, just crash and burn like that? Go down in flames and feel your body hit the pavement at a hundred miles an hour?"

Jason laughed, but Wendy eyed Kevin warily. He had a mildly demented look in his eyes, like he wasn't kidding. Like that was the kind of thing he thought about all the time. She made a face.

"Uh, maybe you think about that stuff," Wendy said, "but see, the rest of us, our lives are actually going somewhere."

Jason laughed uncomfortably. "Come on, Wendy. He's just kidding." He looked at his watch. "We gotta go to Devil's Flight. Our fast passes are for nine fifteen. If we don't make it, we gotta stand in line, like, for a day and a half. That'd kill me."

Kevin looked at his watch. "Come on J-dog, we got plenty of time. It's only eight forty-five, and I'm starving."

He looked around at all the games of skill, until he spotted a food stall with a little roofed eating area next to it. A sign on the roof read: Deep Fried Twinkies and Snickers Bars! A look of almost religious worship came over his face. His mouth hung half open.

"Deep... fried... Snickers..." he said, and raised his arms like a zombie in an old horror movie. "Deep... fried... Snickers..."

"Deep fried Snickers?" asked Jason, grimacing. He, Carrie and Wendy followed Kevin. "Before Devil's Flight? Now that really would kill me."

Kevin smirked. "That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger," he said.

"You just told us you almost lost your lunch on the last ride," Carrie said. "Now you want to eat more?"

Kevin turned to face the others as he took his place in the food line. "We said 'till we puke, right?" he said, mock punching Jason in the arm. "I just want to get the texture right before I hurl. It's an art, you know, adjusting the mix. You can't just go eating any old thing."

"Ew, gross," Carrie squealed. "God."

Wendy wrinkled her nose in disgust. "That's completely revolting," she said.

Kevin put a hand on his chest and tried to look noble. "They laughed at Jackson Pollock, too," he said. "Nobody understands the soul of a tortured artist."

Jason laughed and shook his head. "Dude, you're crazy."

Wendy let out a little stifled giggle in spite of herself. She never in a million years would have imagined that someone like Kevin would know the artist Jackson Pollock. He must have heard about Pollock on some TV quiz show or something.

Kevin shrugged and turned to order his deep fried monstrosity. Wendy looked over her shoulder, back at the High Dive ride. She watched it for a minute, waiting for it to cycle through its flashes, and for the V to blink out again. It didn't. She frowned. Must be a long cycle. She looked up the midway toward Devil's Flight. Live flames roared above the entrance. Two carloads of McKinley seniors screamed by, almost horizontal as the G-forces flung the cars out. They disappeared into the flames. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. It looked like they had crashed and burned, just like Kevin had talked about moments before.

"Hey, Wednesday," Jason called. "You going to order anything?"

Wendy looked up. Jason was at the order window, looking back at her. She shrugged to shake off the sudden inexplicable tension in her shoulders and stepped forward.

"Just a Seven-Up," she said.

"Seven-Up?" Kevin scowled comically. "Seven-Up is clear, no texture at all."

Carrie punched Kevin in the shoulder. "Kevin," she said. "Cut it out."

"OK, fine," said Wendy. "I'll have a bag of those roasted peanuts too." She smirked at Kevin. "How's that for texture?"

"Thatta girl," Kevin said, triumphant. "And how about you, J-dog? You gonna go for the deep fried desert apocalypse?"

"Hell no," Jason replied, patting his lean abs. "I gotta keep my girlish figure."

"You're girlish alright," Kevin said. "No sense of culinary adventure."

The sullen woman on the other side of the counter handed Kevin his deep fried Snickers. He waved the hot, sugary mess under Jason's nose.

"Come to the dark side, Jaywalker," Kevin intoned, making his voice deep and wheezing in an imitation of Darth Vader.

"Forget it," Jay said, laughing and pushing the Styrofoam plate away.

Once they all got their respective snacks, they sat down at a plastic table in the covered seating area. There were so many McKinley High students around that the place reminded Wendy of the lunch quad. She popped a peanut out of its shell and into her mouth, and then turned towards Jason.

Jason had ordered a shiny red candied apple on a stick as a sort of compromise between healthy and junk. The glistening, crimson orb looked far too red to Wendy, unnatural, lurid and poisonous, like the poison apple the evil witch gave to Snow White. Jason went to take a large bite, and Wendy had to stifle a sudden, powerful urge to reach out and stop him. What the hell had gotten into her anyway? Everything she saw seemed dangerous and menacing tonight. Was it because she had finally, after much hemming and hawing, agreed to get on that stupid roller coaster? Was it just her control freak anxiety messing with her? She wished that this Red River foolishness was over, that she could be alone with Jason and forget about everything else. But she had promised Mr Smith that she would deliver enough photos for a last minute, two-page spread, and she did not want to let him down.

She pulled the camera strap off her neck and set it on the table. She certainly did not want to take any pictures of Kevin wolfing down the deep fried Snickers. That would be far too hideous for publication. On the cheap, Styrofoam plate before him was a gooey, revolting mess of melting whipped cream and hot fudge slopped over two glistening, brown lumps of fried grease and chocolate. He scooped up a large chunk and popped it into his mouth, eyes closed and making wordless sounds of gustatory ecstasy. Beside him, Carrie had nothing but a Diet Coke, and was watching Kevin eat his deep fried Snickers with a kind of horrified fascination, as if he were eating bugs or human flesh. Her reaction was so comical that Wendy wondered if maybe she should snap a shot after all, but Kevin suddenly reached across the table and snatched the camera, grinning with chocolate webbed teeth.

Wendy tried to grab it back, but he held it up high above her.

"Kevin," Wendy pleaded. "Come on, give it back. It's not even my camera. It's the yearbook's."

"Then consider me a freelance photographer," said Kevin.

He leaned back toward a passing group of girls, holding the camera low to the ground, and snapped a picture up the short skirt of a girl named Stacy Kobayashi. The pretty senior was too busy talking to her friends to notice.

"Dude," said Jason, laughing. "Did you get it? Let me see."

Kevin held up the camera to check the screen, but Wendy ripped it out of his hands. She turned it around and clicked the button in his face. The flash went off right in front of his nose. He reeled back, clutching his eyes and wailing dramatically.

"My eyes. My eyes." He waved his arms like a blind man. "I'll never see again."

Wendy pulled the camera back, turning away to protect it from any further foolishness. She looked at the extreme close-up of Kevin on the screen, blazing white from the flash. His eyes were wide. He looked terrified, like a bomb had gone off in his face. She shivered. It was funny, she thought, how the camera could catch stuff that wasn't really there. Kevin wasn't terrified, just surprised. It was just the angle and the closeness that made him look that way.

Carrie leaned in to her. "Um," she whispered. "Can you please delete that one of Stacy?"

"I will, don't worry," said Wendy. "But I still haven't figured out to how to do that yet. I need to check the book. I'll do it at home, okay?"

"No," said Kevin. "Don't. Don't. You gotta keep that one."

Wendy sniffed. "Need I remind you, yet again," she said. "These pictures are for the yearbook, not *Playboy*. I have to turn them in tomorrow to make the deadline, and I am not going to let Mr Smith think I took a shot of Stacy Kobayashi's camel toe. It's not exactly yearbook material."

Kevin and Jason exchanged a filthy look.

"Are you kidding?" said Kevin. "I'd buy two."

The boys laughed and poked each other, and Kevin returned to devouring his gooey, deep fried Snickers.

Carrie leaned in again and lowered her voice. "I'm sorry, Wendy," she said. "Kevin can get so out of control sometimes."

Wendy shrugged. "S'okay," she replied. "I gotta say though, I don't know how you put up with him. He'd drive me crazy after five minutes."

"He is driving me crazy." Carrie shot a quick glance at Kevin, who was busy flicking a bit of whipped cream at Jason. She lowered her voice and whispered in Wendy's ear. "I... I'm breaking up with him."

Wendy looked up at her, surprised. She looked warily at Kevin. He was still involved with his food. fight, oblivious.

"You are?" Wendy frowned, unsure of how to react to this sudden confidence.

"Don't say anything, okay? Especially not to Jason." Carrie stole another glance back at the two boys. "I've been wanting to for a while, but Kevin's leaving for UNLV, so I thought I'd, you know, just wait and do it then. It's as good an excuse as any, right?"

"Sure, I guess," said Wendy slowly. "Are you seeing somebody else?"

"Huh?" Carrie shrugged. "Nah, nothing like that. It's just, you know how Kevin is. High school fun and games are nearly over. I like to have fun too, but now I need to find a real man, a grown-up. Someone I can build a life, a future and a family with. Not some

immature, ambitionless goofball who thinks he can just skate through life on crude jokes and boyish charm. Besides, am I supposed to just sit around twiddling myself and waiting for him for four years? Forget that. He'll find some college slut—or fifty college sluts—and he'll forget all about old what's-her-name back home. Me, I've got my future to think of."

Wendy nodded and looked across the table, but she didn't look at Kevin. She looked at Jason. Carrie's logic wasn't unlike what she had been thinking herself, back in the lunch quad. So many things were changing. It was as if the photos Wendy was taking were little frozen slices of time, historical documents that captured them in the moment just before the gondola dropped them down into the rest of their lives.

Kevin craned his neck to look over their heads. He jabbed Jason in the arm with his elbow.

"Now that's what I call real yearbook material," Kevin said.

Jason chuckled. "Yearbook," he said. "Is that the new mag from the guys who put out *Barely Legal*?"

"That's 'College Yearbook,'" Kevin said. "They always have to add the word 'College' to make sure no one gets the wrong idea."

"K-dog," Jason said. "You are the tenth degree, black belt, dragon master of the wrong idea."

"I think I'm having a few wrong ideas right now," Kevin said.

"Yeah, you and every other guy on earth," Jason said. "Get in line."

"Can't we buy fast passes?" Kevin asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Wendy and Carrie shared a moment of disgusted eye rolling and looked around to see what the guys were looking at. At a game booth across the midway, surrounded by a dozen drooling teenaged boys, Ashley Freund and Ashlyn Halperin, the two most popular girls in school, were sitting on rickety stools, holding machine gun shaped water guns. They were trying to shoot water into the mouths of leering, plastic clown faces. Balloons stuck out of tops of the clowns' heads, and the more water went into the clowns' mouths, the bigger the balloons got.

However, it clearly wasn't the game that had attracted Kevin's attention. Ashley and Ashlyn were notoriously gorgeous: tall, sleek

and flawless, and similar as sisters. Skyscraper legs and taut, sculpted asses. Tiny waists, flat muscular abs and the kind of full, perky breasts that implants strove to imitate, Ashley's slightly larger than Ashlyn's. They were both blonde, though neither natural. Ashley had the kind of generic, all American, cheerleader looks of a Budweiser girl, or a model from a give-away tool calendar, while Ashlyn was a little more striking and exotic, with narrow, cat-slanted, green eyes, a pert, pixie nose and lush, wide mouth. They were every teenaged boy's wet dream and they knew it all too well.

Boys couldn't help imagining threesomes with the two of them, or just watching them do things to each other. Ashley and Ashlyn, reveling in the attention their beauty and popularity won them, did everything they could to encourage those fantasies. They wore skin tight, low slung, Brazilian jeans and had forgone the Grad Night T-shirts for tiny, low cut, spaghetti strap tops that exposed their long torsos and narrow waists, and showed as much cleavage as the law allowed. As if that wasn't enough, they always made sure to walk arm in arm, and hug and kiss with an affection that seemed just a little more than friendly.

"They deserve an eight-page pictorial with a fold out," said Kevin, laughing.

Wendy sneered. There was no way she was putting those two sluts in her pages for the yearbook. She despised them. Not because they were beautiful, or even for the way they dressed, at least that's what she told herself. She hated them for being so manipulative. They didn't have steady boyfriends—not that Wendy knew of, anyway—but they always had a huge cloud of boys hanging around, who did whatever they asked, no matter how humiliating. The boys fought for their attention, each thinking that they might be the one the girls picked. But, of course, they never picked any of them. They just led them around by their desperate, teenage dicks. In the locker room once, Wendy had heard the girls brag openly that they hadn't paid for clothes or shoes or a meal since they were in the ninth grade.

"Boys buy them," Ashley had said.

"That's what they're for," Ashlyn had replied.

"Life support for the wallet," they had both said in perfect unison.

"Come on, Wendy," said Kevin. "You know that's a good shot!"

Wendy looked around at the ring of boys surrounding the girls. The boys looked like stuffed trout, their eyes glazed and their mouths hanging open as they gazed stupidly at the girls, all the blood drained out of their brains and into their crotches. It made Wendy sick.

"No way," she said. "No way."

But then she paused. It would serve all those stupid boys right if she took the picture. The fights that would start fifteen years from now when they were flipping through their yearbooks with their wives, and they came upon this shot. She smiled sardonically.

"All right, fine, I'll take one," she said. "Wait here."

She stood up and crossed the midway to the booth. Her best angle would be down the row of guns. That way she could get Ashley and Ashlyn in as well as the faces of all the boys, and show that they were looking at the girls, not the game. Wendy looked at the clown heads to see how long she had to get her shot. It made her a little queasy how much the gaping clown heads looked like the gaping boys. One of the balloons was about to explode. She'd better take her shot quickly.

She raised her camera and framed the shot. Perfect. She squeezed the button, but just as she did, a bright red police light started flashing and a siren began screaming. She looked up. A centrifugal force ride called The One Eighty was starting up. She gave it a dirty look, and then checked her picture. It was ruined. The framing was perfect, with Ashley and Ashlyn in the center of a circle of leering boys, but the flashing red light had turned them a fiery red orange, totally blowing out all the detail in the shot. She would have to try again. She sighed, and then shivered as she looked at the picture again. It looked like the girls' hair was on fire.

A loud bang snapped her head up, jerking her out of her reverie. Ashlyn's clown's balloon had exploded. The boys around the two girls were cheering and clapping enthusiastically as if the girls had just won Oscars. Ashley was high-fiving Ashlyn. The booth attendant came forward and motioned to the prizes on the wall of the booth. They were mostly posters—Kurt Cobain, Aayilah, Dale Earnhardt, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison, Elvis Presley, Tupac

Shakur, Selena. Something about the pictures made Wendy shiver again, and she wasn't sure why. There was something that connected all the celebrities in the pictures, but she just couldn't put her finger on it.

Ashlyn snubbed the posters and instead selected a large inflatable palm tree. The booth attendant shrugged and retrieved it from its shelf, handing it over. She waved it over her head and let out a victory whoop. Her toadying admirers cheered again, and the girls moved off to saunter down the midway, arm in arm. The boys followed like a pack of dogs following a butcher's truck.

Wendy wasn't having much luck with her pictures tonight. She might as well have left the camera at home, like Jason asked.

A trio of oblivious girls bumped into her, almost knocking the camera from her hand.

"Excuse me," she said, as she turned to look at them.

Two of the girls looked back and gaped at her. Wendy recognized them as Amber Regan and Perry Malinowski, two of her little sister's closest friends. Amber was a natural redhead, tall and still a little awkward, all lanky limbs and big feet, while cuter Perry was blond and sturdy with a saucy swing to her walk and sly blue eyes. They were both juniors, and this was senior night. Juniors weren't supposed to be here.

"What are you two doing here?" she asked, then paused.

The third girl looked around. It was her sister, Julie.

"Julie, are you nuts?" Wendy asked. "What are you doing here?"

Julie stuck her bottom lip out, petulant. She was a little shorter, curvier and more fashion conscious than Wendy, and far more rebellious. She had a defiant tilt to her strong chin and a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, green eyes like their mother's, rather than Wendy's clear, coffee brown.

"Having fun," Julie said. "At least I was."

Wendy held up two fingers, her scolding posture unconsciously mimicking their mother.

"First of all," she said, touching her middle finger, "it's senior night. You girls are not seniors."

"Well, our dates are," said Perry, her pale eyebrows arched defiantly.

"And where are your 'dates' now?" Wendy asked.

Amber flapped her hand. "Oh," she said casually. "We lost them hours ago."

The girls giggled, hiding their smirks behind glitter polished fingernails. Wendy frowned and touched her index finger.

"Second of all, Julie," Wendy said, voice stern and serious, "you know what Doctor Finebaum says. No roller coasters. No thrill rides of any kind. Your heart..."

"Screw my stupid heart and screw old Doctor Finebitch!" Julie said, her fists at her sides. "I just want to have normal fun, like normal kids. I'm so tired of Finebaum and all her restrictions. I don't feel sick. Look at me. Do I look sick?"

"It doesn't matter how you feel," said Wendy, trying for patience. "You know that. Any stress on your heart..."

Julie shot a worried glance at her friends, and then turned back to Wendy. "Shut up, okay?" she hissed. "You're embarrassing me."

Wendy sighed. Julie had been born with a congenital heart condition and had to be very careful not to do anything that would cause undue stress on the delicate organ. No roller coasters. No scary movies. No athletics. The list of noes went on and on and Julie hated it. She was an adventurous, energetic, inquisitive girl and wanted to do everything her friends did, and more. Her hidden infirmity was like a prison to her and she railed against it more and more every day. Wendy felt for her little sister, but was afraid for her too. For as long as Wendy could remember she had worried about Julie and struggled to protect her and keep her safe. In a way, much of her control freak nature stemmed from growing up under the shadow of the fear of losing Julie to forces beyond her control. She would never admit that, but she would also never forgive herself if anything happened to Julie.

Julie grabbed Wendy's arm. "Don't tell mom," she begged. "Wendy, please. You are a complete bitch if you tell her. I told her I was spending the night at Perry's. Please don't tell her about this."

"I'll tell you what," said Wendy. "You don't ride any rides and I won't tell mom. Deal?"

Julie looked sulky and scuffed her foot on the tarmac. "You'd blackmail your own sister?" she asked.

"Only because I care about you, dingbat," Wendy replied.

Julie wrinkled her nose and mimicked Wendy's voice, giving it a high, facetious twist. "Only because I care..."

"No rides, Julie," Wendy said. "That's the deal."

Julie sighed, defeated. "Okay, you win," she said. "Deal."

"Cool." Wendy squeezed Julie's shoulder. "All right, have fun, girls."

Julie rolled her eyes dramatically at her two friends. "Sure thing, Mom Jr," Julie said. "I'll have plenty of fun." She turned back to her friends. "Come on, guys, let's go."

Wendy was starting back to Jason, Kevin and Carrie when Julie called her name again.

"Hey Wendy!"

Wendy turned around.

Julie was flipping her off, giving her the finger with both hands.

"Take a shot of this for the yearbook."

Wendy lifted her camera and snapped, and at last it was a good one. Julie was dead center in the shot, tongue out and fingers up. Wendy laughed and waved the camera at Julie.

"That was brilliant, genius," Wendy said. "Now I have iron clad proof that you were here. So no rides or Mom gets an eight by ten of that photo taped to the coffee maker tomorrow morning."

"You wouldn't dare, you bitch," cried Julie.

She turned away, whispering with her friends. As they stalked off, Perry leaned into Julie, snickering.

"How cool would it be," Perry asked, "if that was, like, the cover of the yearbook?"

"Yeah," Julie responded. "FUCK MCKINLEY HIGH!"

The three girls dissolved into giggles as they slipped away into the crowd.

Jason, Kevin and Carrie were rising as she walked back to their table. Kevin was chuckling.

"Your sister rocks!" he said.

Wendy snorted derisively.

"She's an idiot," she replied. "She knows she's not supposed to be here."

Jason checked his watch again. "Come on, kids," he said. "We're going to be late for our date with the Devil if we don't get a move on."

Wendy frowned but said nothing as Jason took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. They started down the midway again, Kevin and Carrie racing ahead and laughing. As they came around the Whirling Dervish, a tilt-a-whirl ride with seats made to look like flying carpets and an entrance decorated with a cartoon of a spinning man in a fez holding two outsized scimitars, they saw Lewis Romero at the Ring-The-Bell strongman game.

Lewis was an enormous jock, a fullback on the McKinley High football team, who was built like a Mack truck, hugely muscular, but still thick through the middle. He clearly fancied himself a bad ass tough guy. He had been born in Santiago, in the Dominican Republic, and his face was an exotic mix of Latino and African-American features, strikingly handsome, but more than a little mean, jaw set with the kind of ornery, stubborn hostility common in those whose chest measurement is higher than their IQ.

His mother had his name officially changed from Luis to the more Americanized Lewis when he was a toddler, back when the Romero family had first moved to McKinley sixteen years ago, and Lewis had embraced all things American ever since. He was dressed head to toe, as usual, in silver and black, sporting a silver and black Raiders jersey, baggy, black, shin-length shorts with a reflective silver stripe, and expensive black leather Air Jordan XIII sneakers that were as glossy and spotless as a brand new car. McKinley was miles and miles from Los Angeles, but Lewis was still utterly fixated on the Raiders, even going so far as to pick fights with fans of their own local team. He told anyone who would listen—and many who would not—that he was going to play for the Raiders someday if it killed him.

Lewis had the Whirling Dervish game's huge wooden mallet over his shoulder and was sizing up the twenty-five foot pole with the bell

at the top. His girlfriend—Wendy thought her name might be Vicky, or something like that—a short, abundantly curvy Latina with a pretty face and a shy, quiet demeanor, stood nearby, almost hidden behind the two huge, plush stuffed animals Lewis had already won.

The backing board of the game was decorated with cartoons. At the five foot mark was a drawing of a nerd with glasses and skinny arms. He was labeled Pencil Neck Geek. At ten feet was a limp wristed guy in a pink shirt—the Girly Man. At twenty feet was a beefy, square-jawed hero in a fifties style letter sweater—the Stud. At the top was an enormously muscled, gap toothed, black sunglasses-wearing, Arnold Schwarzenegger caricature—The X-Terminator! His face was painted on the bell.

Wendy slowed to take in the scene.

"Hang on, guys," she said. "I gotta get this one."

She smiled. Now this was a perfect yearbook picture. She raised her camera and lined up the shot, then waited. Nothing was going to mess this one up.

Lewis stepped to the plank lever at the front of the game and set his feet like a golfer standing over the tee. He kissed his index and middle finger, pounded his chest with his fist and pointed his finger to heaven—though whether he was giving props to Jesus or just indicating that he was going to send the bell into the clouds, Wendy didn't know.

Lewis set the mallet on the ground, waggled his fingers around the handle for his best grip, then raised it over his head, and with a roar like an enraged buffalo, smashed the mallet down on the plank with all his strength.

Wendy snapped the picture, hoping she'd caught the action.

The bell clanged, and there was a second, harsh screeching sound right behind it. Wendy looked up. The bell had sheared completely off the pole. Lewis had decapitated Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the painted bell was falling down past the demon-faced cars of Devil's Flight that were rocketing by in the background. Wendy's inexplicable chill returned, but the bell bounced harmlessly off the concrete and rolled to a stop behind a popcorn vendor.

Lewis raised his thick arms in triumph, the mallet held high over his head like a barbarian from a Conan movie.

"Yeah," he bellowed. "I rock!"

Wendy looked down at her camera's digital screen as Jason and Kevin ran forward to congratulate Lewis, who was now doing an ecstatic end zone shimmy. The picture was terrible, again. Another failure. She had caught Lewis just after he had hit the plank, and his head was down. Only his shoulders showed. He looked like the headless horseman. Just above his missing head she could see the weight, blurred with motion, racing up the rail—though you couldn't tell from the picture which way it was traveling. The weight could just as easily be dropping down the rail. The unsettling, headless shot of Lewis, combined with the decapitation of the bell, made Wendy's chill turn into the full-fledged willies. What was this sense of wrongness she couldn't seem to shake? She felt like someone was walking on her grave. Her mouth was dry and her heart was racing frantically in her too tight chest.

A speaker, hidden inside a fiberglass devil head that had been mounted on one of the struts of the looping coaster, chose that moment to squawk:

"You can run, but you can't hide."

Wendy jumped as its demonic laughter echoed tinnily from its wide, frozen mouth.

Lewis was high fiving Jason and Kevin as his girlfriend collected yet another huge, stuffed animal from the disgruntled attendant—this time a pink and purple bear the size of a tubby nine year-old.

"Dude," Jason said to Lewis. "That was awesome. You won, dude. You totally killed it."

Kevin held his hands up in a mock-heroic gesture. "Verily, here stands the mighty Lewis," he intoned. "Who with a single blow did slay the giant Ahnald, and knock his friggin' head off."

The attendant wasn't getting into the celebratory spirit. He fetched the heavy bell from the behind the popcorn cart and crossed to Lewis.

"Yeah, yeah, great," he growled. "Just gimme the hammer back and get outta here. I gotta close the game now. Stupid kids."

Lewis shoved the mallet back at him with a little more force than was necessary.

"Hey man," Lewis said. "I only did what I was supposed to do. Not my fault if you guys don't keep your shit repaired."

Jason laughed. "I sure hope Devil's Flight is in better shape," he said.

Kevin nodded, smirking. "Yeah," he added. "Especially if you're getting on it, Lewis. You'll break the tracks just sitting in it."

Lewis shoved Kevin, grinning. "Didn't get no complaints from your mama last night," He said.

"That's because you were suffocating her with your big fat gut," Kevin replied.

"Hey, fuck you," Lewis said, thick brows drawn together, and looking like he was about to turn the playful ribbing into something more serious.

Jason quickly stepped between them, pointing to his watch and then toward Devil's Flight.

"Got to go. Got to go," Jason said. "Got a date with destiny."

"Destiny?" asked Lewis, puzzled. "Who's she? You break up with Wendy or you just getting a little on the side?" He saw Wendy step up and take Jason's arm, and had the decency to be embarrassed. "Oh, hey, Wendy."

Kevin pointed to the ride, still doing his mock-heroic voice.

"To Devil's Flight," he cried. "And destiny!"

Lewis checked his ticket. "Oh yeah, right," he said. "Us too." He took the pink and purple bear from his girlfriend's overloaded arms. "Come on, Veronica. Let's go."

Wendy and Jason, Kevin and Carrie, and Lewis and Veronica all started for the entrance of Devil's Flight. A big fiberglass statue of a demon, complete with wings, horns and hooves, beckoned them closer. It was menacingly underlit, with red lights hidden in the shrubbery around it.

"You can run! But you can't hide!" the demon said in a crackly, electronic voice. "Devil's Flight will have your hide!"

It let out a low, evil chuckle, harsh and grating in Wendy's ears.

The boys all laughed at the carnival cheesiness of the thing, but Wendy found it hard to suppress a shudder.

# THREE

"Come on, Wendy," said Jason. "Take my picture with Ol' Scratch over here."

Jason clambered up into the planter to stand beside the fiberglass devil. He threw his arm around its cherry red shoulder and gave Wendy a goofy grin and a thumbs up.

"Jason," she said. "You're going to get us thrown out."

"Not if you hurry up and take the picture," he replied.

Wendy sighed, then lifted the camera and snapped the shot. The coaster's cars screamed through a loop overhead. Wendy looked up anxiously as Jason stepped down to rejoin her. Ahead of them, Kevin, Carrie, Lewis and Veronica were standing at the entrance, waiting for them to catch up before they joined the line that snaked deep into the heart of the coaster's center. Arrows directed those with fast passes one way, and lesser beings the other. The entrance was shaped like a demon too; a giant beast that straddled the way in with arms and wings stretched wide.

"Come on, J-dog," Kevin called, impatient.

"Did you get it?" Jason asked.

"Huh?" Wendy frowned. "Er, yeah sure, I got it."

Jason seemed to notice her nervousness, and put his arm around her. "You're not going to back out now, are you?" he asked. "It would be a waste of a ticket."

"No, no," she said. "It's just..." She paused, uncomfortable. "You ever have that déjà vu feeling, you know, like all this has happened before, only for something that hasn't happened yet?"

Jason chuckled. "That's an old gag. *Vuja de*: the feeling that none of this has ever happened before." His smile faltered as he saw that Wendy wasn't joining in on the joke. He frowned. "You're really weirded out about this, huh?"

She shrugged, not looking up.

Jason stepped in front of her. He gripped her shoulders and tilted her head up. He looked into her eyes.

"Hey. Listen to me, Wendy. I know you. I know how much trouble you have letting go. You always gotta be in control. I think that's why coasters freak you out. They're all about not being in control. But you gotta learn to live a little. Let go a little. And this is about the safest way to do it on the planet. Roller coasters are safer than airplanes, and airplanes are safer than cars, and you don't freak out when you're riding shotgun in my car, do you? Do you?"

Wendy shook her head.

"So there you go," Jason concluded. "You got no reason to freak out, right? It's supposed to be fun. Have some fun."

"I know you're right," Wendy said. "I just can't help it. I keep getting this unshakeable feeling something's going to go horribly wrong."

"Come on, Wednesday," Jason said. "You need to meet your fears head-on. That's the only way to beat them."

Wendy looked down, embarrassed. She had a fierce urge to throw her arms around Jason and tell him she couldn't wait, that she wanted to go home with him right now. She knew how badly he wanted to finally make love to her, and knew that if she asked him to go now he would do it without hesitation. But the very thought of using his desire to manipulate him like that made her feel just as disgusted with herself as she was with Ashley and Ashlyn. She couldn't do that to him just because she had a spooky feeling.

"Would you guys come on," called Kevin.

Wendy pulled in a long, slow breath and forced herself to relax. "Okay," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm over it. Let's go."

"Excellent." Jason took her hand and they joined the others.

"Bout time," Kevin said.

He and Carrie turned to the turnstiles. Jason and Wendy followed, but Lewis and Veronica were there before them. They were trying to push through, but the three huge stuffed animals got caught in the turnstiles.

An attendant noticed their struggle and stepped forward. "You can't bring those on the ride," he said, shaking his head. "Sorry."

"Come on, dude," said Lewis.

The attendant shook his head. "I don't make the rules, man," he said.

Lewis grunted. He piled his stuffed bear on top of the two animals Veronica was carrying.

"Go wait at the exit," he ordered. "I ain't missing this ride."

Veronica pouted, big brown eyes looking as sad as the eyes of the giant blue panda she was carrying, but she said nothing. She walked quietly back out of the entrance, shoulders slumped and submissive.

"What a jerk," Wendy said under her breath.

Lewis pushed through the turnstiles and the others followed him in. Wendy shivered as they went under the devil's legs. She hurried after Jason as he led them all toward the fast pass lane.

They wound through a maze of railings, and at last reached the back of the line. There was another spread-legged demon here, guarding the entrance to the loading platform. Wendy saw Ashley and Ashlyn, leaning on the rail. Kneeling before the girls with a tiny, handheld, digital video camera was Frank Cheek, the guy Wendy had always thought of as the creepiest kid in the school, until he'd graduated two years before. He was a skinny, peculiar guy with blue tinted sunglasses and greasy Seventies hair, an ill-conceived combination of Rob Evans and Bob Guccione, with all the fey flair of the former, coupled with the icky perversity of the latter. Wendy made a face. He was living up to his sleazy reputation in spades.

He waved his arm at Ashlyn as he looked at the flip out screen on his camera.

"Ashlyn, Ashley," he crowed. "Where you are right now, if you raise your hands, it'll look like your holding the devil's balls."

Ashlyn and Ashley curled their slick, red lips in perfectly mirrored sneers.

"Yeah, right," Ashley said.

"And we'd want to do that, why?" Ashlyn asked.

Frank leered, giggling. "Where else are you ever going to find a dick that big?"

Ashlyn rolled her eyes. "We're looking at one right now," she said.

Frank grinned. "Oh, so you've heard."

"Yeah, right," Ashley said.

"Dream on, Mr Peanut," Ashlyn said.

Frank laughed, a high-pitched, demented giggle, but seemed otherwise unfazed by their catty sniping.

"You two are smokin'," Frank said.

"Get out of here, Frank," Ashley said.

"Yeah," Ashlyn said. "You already graduated, like, two whole years ago."

"Sure," Frank said, "but I had to come and check out you two hotties, now that you're officially legal."

The girls rolled their eyes and ignored him as they followed the moving line through the second set of turnstiles. He hurried after them, camera zooming in on their swaying behinds as they walked.

Wendy turned away in disgust and noticed the usual warning sign next to the turnstiles.

"Devil's Flight is a high velocity thrill ride. Due to the forces created by this ride, for your safety, guests must be in good health and free from heart conditions, nervous disorders, weak backs, necks, or other physical limitations. No cameras or loose items allowed."

Wendy took her camera from around her neck, and palmed it. She had no pockets big enough to put it in. Below the warning sign was another sign. A cartoon devil pointed to the turnstiles that controlled access to the loading platform.

No exit after turnstiles.

The devil was winking. A word balloon over his head said: "I'll see you soon!"

Jason pushed through the turnstile without a pause, but Wendy hesitated, looking up at the demon looming over her. She took another deep breath, clenched her jaw and stepped through. The ratchet of the turnstile sounded loud in her ear—*CLACK, CLACK, CLACK*. She joined Jason and the others. At the front of the line, an attendant was directing people to stand in numbered lanes along the edge of the platform.

Jason stepped out of line to count the people in front of them.

"I wanna see where we're gonna end up," he said. "We gotta get front seat. We just gotta."

Wendy swallowed. She'd said she would go on the stupid ride. She hadn't said anything about sitting up front. A train roared up to the platform in a cacophony of hissing hydraulics and popping electrical current. The noise sounded as loud as fireworks in Wendy's ears. She flinched. The bright red train was segmented like a centipede, with only two side-by-side seats to each section, and a jointed coupling between them so it could twist smoothly through all the loops and turns of the ride. There were twelve sections. The front of the first section was molded to look like a grinning demon face, with glowing red lights for eyes. The rest of the sections were smooth, red, candy slick metal.

Jason saw her reaction and squeezed her. "It's okay, baby," he said softly, big hand warm on the small of her back. "I'm telling you, there's nothing to worry about."

"He's right, you know," said a voice behind them.

This time Jason jumped a little too, and they both turned around a bit too fast. Standing behind them were Ian McKinley and Erin Ulmer, the high school's resident misfit Goth couple.

Ian was thin as a fingernail clipping and bone white, built like an awkward marionette with bad skin, sharp hawkish features and furtive, close set blue eyes behind tiny, steel-rimmed glasses. He wore an oversized black T-shirt that fit his scrawny shoulders like a sail, and read: "SMOKE CRACK AND WORSHIP SATAN." His pipe-cleaner legs were snugly encased in slick, black, vinyl pants. His dyed black hair fell like a crow's wing across his high, shiny forehead and his ears were heavy with thick steel rings and rivets. Everything about him, from his deliberately obnoxious T-shirt to his superior sneer was designed to piss everyone else off as much as possible, but under his brittle, "fuck you" glare he gave off a strong vibe of beta male insecurity. He guarded Erin like a bone, as if terrified that a bigger dog would take her away at any moment.

Erin was quite pretty, if a little on the heavy side, and Wendy could not help but imagine what she would look like without all the sooty eye liner, ashy purple lipstick and white pancake make-up. Her hair was a riot of black and blue dreadlocks around her wide, heart shaped face, and her dark eyes were huge and liquid, like the eyes of

an anime heroine. Silver bats dangled from her ears and nestled in her ample cleavage. Her nose, lower lip and left eyebrow were all pierced, and her "fuck you" sneer seemed to have an ironic sense of humor behind it. You could see that she did not take herself nearly as seriously as Ian did.

Wendy was always slightly unnerved by these two, not so much by their darker than thou air of gloomy glamour, but because they shared a jokey, elitist attitude that looked down on everyone and everything. They seemed to hate everyone in the world besides each other.

"A roller coaster is just elemental physics," said Ian. "A conversion of potential energy to kinetic energy. Right?"

Erin nodded, smirking. "Absolutely," she said.

"The odds are only one in two hundred and fifty million of dying while riding on a roller coaster," Ian said. "Highly improbable."

"Right," Wendy said, not feeling even remotely reassured.

"Of course, if you did die," Ian added, "it would be exceptionally messy."

Jason glared at them and Wendy frowned. This kind of reassurance she didn't need.

"Thanks for that, McKinley," Jason said. "Now would you mind being creepy somewhere else?"

Ian continued to lecture as if Jason hadn't spoken. "In fact," he said, "you are more likely to die driving to an amusement park, than actually at one."

"Yeah," said Jason, his teeth on edge. "I already said that. Thanks. Now do you mind?"

"Not at all," said Erin, taking Ian's arm. "Forget we're even here. I know I've already forgotten you."

Jason and Wendy turned back to Kevin and Carrie. Jason and Kevin exchanged a disgusted look. Kevin mouthed the word "freaks".

"Yeah," said Jason. "But look, forget them. If we want to sit in the front seats, we've got to snake up five spots."

Wendy shivered. "Jason, listen," she said quietly. "I... I don't want to be a pain, but... I can't sit in front. I cannot see the tracks. I'll freak."

Jason groaned. "Wendy," he said. "Come on. What's the point if you're not sitting in front?"

"I'm sorry," she said, a hot, embarrassed flush creeping up her cheeks. "Look, I promised you I'd go on this thing, and I'm here, okay. But I just... I just can't do that. Please."

"But I don't want to sit in the back," Jason whined like a bratty little boy.

Kevin stepped between them. "Hey, hey," he said. "Let's not have any domestic incidents here. Don't worry about it. Carrie can sit with Wendy in the back."

Carrie's mouth dropped open in outrage. "What?" she said. "Why me? 'Cause I'm a girl? Bitches in the back and that's that, huh? Forget it. I love roller coasters. I want to sit in front, too."

Carrie and Kevin looked at Jason, waiting for him to make a decision. Wendy squirmed with embarrassment. Why was she being such a wimp? She had no idea, but she just couldn't seem to help it. She was already freaked out enough. Sitting in front would be more than she could bear. It would kill her.

"Go ahead, Jay," she said at last. "I'll live. You sit up front. I'll sit in the back."

"Nah, nah," he said. "You can't sit by yourself. That's bullshit. I..."

Wendy could tell he wanted to do the chivalrous thing, but he couldn't seem to get the words out of his mouth.

"Wait," said Kevin. He dug in his pocket and pulled out a quarter.

"Call it." He flipped the coin in the air.

"Heads," said Jason.

Kevin caught the coin and slapped it down on the back of his left hand. He held the hand out. It had landed tails up.

"Shit!" cried Kevin, pounding his legs with his fists. "Why did I do that? Dumb-ass." He sighed. "Ah, what the fuck. It's the same ride, right?"

Jason laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Sure it is, dude. It's exactly the same. Thanks." He leaned in to murmur in Kevin's ear, but Wendy couldn't help overhearing. "Take care of Wendy for me, okay? She was kinda weirded out back there."

Kevin held up his fist. "No worries," he replied.

They touched fists.

Carrie kissed Kevin on the cheek.

"You're such a knight in shining armor," she said.

"Yeah yeah," Kevin said with a surly frown. "Good guys always finish last."

Carrie turned toward the front of the line and beckoned to Jason. "Come on," she said, tugging the neckline of her T-shirt down to reveal more cleavage. "And let me do the talking."

She pushed past Frank Cheek, who was still busy trying to film Ashley and Ashlyn. The girls were obliviously talking on their respective cellphones, ignoring him completely. Beyond them was Lewis. Carrie slid in beside him, batting her eyes and whispering in his ear while squeezing her breasts together.

Lewis grinned lasciviously. "No problem, girl," he replied. "Go for it."

Jason followed her around the huge jock and they continued forward. Wendy watched them for a moment and then turned back to Kevin. He was looking moody. She could tell he was still regretting his decision.

"Thanks, Kevin," she said quietly. "I mean that. I really appreciate it."

Kevin shrugged. "Forget it," he said.

Next to them, Frank Cheek was trying again to engage Ashley and Ashlyn in conversation. They were still on their phones. He held up a cheap necklace he had around his neck. Dangling from it was a big, chrome, mud flap girl silhouette.

"Like this?" he asked. "I won it on the Whacky Ladder. You know, that rope ladder deal that wobbles? I like this. It's totally old school. I'm old school."

Ashley curled a lip and covered the mic of her phone with her hand. "You're getting old, all right," she said.

She exchanged a look with her friend and tilted her head forward. Ashlyn nodded without breaking her own phone conversation. She tapped Lewis on the shoulder and gave him a dazzling smile. Ashley did the same, pointing ahead of him.

Lewis beamed back at them. "Sure thing, ladies. Go ahead. Go ahead." He watched appreciatively as they squeezed past him and sashayed ahead. "You two can stand in front of me any time."

Frank Cheek tried to look over Lewis's shoulder as his prey escaped him. It was impossible. Lewis was a foot taller than him and as wide as a door. Frank tapped the jock on the shoulder and tried to inch around him.

"Uh, 'scuse me," Frank said. "I was with them..."

Lewis shifted his weight and crushed Frank against the rail. "Sorry, Cheek," he said, pushing Frank back with one casual hand. "No more room."

"But..."

"But nothing," Lewis said. "Butt out."

Frank sighed and looked around for a new victim. He saw Wendy and gave her a long once over that made her want to take ten showers. She shuddered and looked away.

Jason and Carrie had made their way to the very front of the line. Wendy saw Jason pump his fist and high five with Carrie to celebrate their victory. They had won the front seats. Wendy wished she could be happy for Jason, but her feeling of dread was stronger than ever.

The attendant directed Jason and Carrie to aisle one, and started sending the rest of the line to the other aisles. The riders hurried to stand by the empty cars. He pointed Ashley and Ashlyn to car seven.

The attendant was moving down the line. He pointed to Lewis.

"How many?" he asked.

Lewis held up a single finger.

"Okay. Hang on." The attendant pointed to Frank. "How many?"

Frank tried to see around Lewis to Ashley and Ashlyn, trying to catch their eye, but they were already walking toward gate seven. He sighed, disappointed.

"One, I guess," Frank replied.

"Okay," the attendant said. "Hang on."

The attendant looked at Kevin and Wendy. Kevin held up two fingers. The attendant nodded and pointed to the car.

"Gate eight," he said.

Kevin started forward, leading Wendy along, as the attendant pointed at Ian and Erin and then at a pair of younger kids.

"At least we're not in the last car," he said.

As they reached the gate, Wendy looked back down the line of people waiting to get in, but just then a scream of brakes and hydraulics made her jump and look around. Another train of twelve cars was sliding into the loading area, decelerating rapidly. The disheveled occupants cheered and laughed and sighed. The automatic restraining arms released and they began to stand and wobble out of the cars onto the far platform.

The gates for the car in front of her opened with a hiss and a bang.

"Everybody in," called the attendant.

Lewis, at gate nine, edged in, his bulk awkward in the tight compartment, but Frank Cheek, waiting to get in beside him, was still craning to look at Ashley and Ashlyn, who were stepping through the gate and taking their seats in car seven. With a darting look at the attendant, he bolted forward and squirmed in front of Wendy and Kevin as they started through gate eight. He sat down behind Ashley and Ashlyn, looking triumphant.

Kevin glared and stepped forward.

"Hey, sleezestack," Kevin said. "Those are our seats. Move your slimy ass."

"Sorry, sorry," Frank said, flipping out the view screen on his camera. "Eight's my lucky number. I have to sit here."

The attendant's voice crackled over the loudspeakers. "Everybody in your seats please."

Kevin's fists clenched. He reached for Frank.

"Listen, scumbag, I'm gonna pull you out of there by your sack if you don't..."

Wendy put a hand on his shoulder. "Kevin, forget it," she said. "Let's just sit in the back. Look, there's nobody in twelve."

Kevin looked up at her like she'd suggested he cut his hand off.

"In the back?" He shook his head. "No way. I didn't wait all this time just to..."

The loudspeaker squawked again. "Please take your seats."

"Yeah," Lewis called. "Get in the rear, Fish. You're used to that position."

Wendy tugged on Kevin's arm. "Come on," she said. "It's not worth fighting over. Besides, you and Jason can go again after this. You said you were gonna ride ten times, so you still have nine rides left to go, right? It's no big deal."

Kevin grunted like it was a very big deal indeed, and gave Frank a fatal look, but did not resist as Wendy led him back to gate twelve. They took their seats in the segment behind two younger boys, jostling and laughing as they squirmed in their seats and mock punched each other.

"Don't worry about it, Ethan," one said to the other.

"But..." Ethan responded.

"Look," the first boy said with all the deep, profoundly jaded world-weariness of his eleven. years. "It's, like, no big deal. We're already in. You're being, like, a total puss."

"Hey," the attendant called, storming towards the car where Wendy and Kevin sat.

For a moment Wendy thought he was coming to throw her and Kevin off and an embarrassing rush of relief washed over her. In front of her, the two boys scrunched down low in their seats, as if trying to disappear.

"How did you kids get through?" the attendant asked the two boys. "You're not tall enough to ride Devil's Flight."

"I told you, Harry," Ethan said.

"What do you mean?" Harry protested. "I'm fifty-five inches!"

"Yeah? Come here." The attendant hauled Harry and Ethan out of their seats and led them to a sign that read: You must be fifty-four inches to ride Devil's Flight. Painted along the side was an oversize ruler topped by an arrow pointed at fifty-four inches. He set the taller boy in front of the sign. The boy seemed to have made the grade by a quarter inch.

"See?" he said.

"Yeah, I see." said the attendant. He put his hand on the top of the kid's head and pushed down. Wendy giggled as she saw the kid strain

to keep his heels off the ground. He lost the fight and his feet fell flat to the floor. His head was just under the arrow.

The attendant smirked. "Nice try, junior," he said. "Come back in six months."

"This totally sucks," Harry said.

"That's the rules, kid," the attendant said. "Outta my control."

"I told you they wouldn't let us on," Ethan said as the attendant ushered them out. "I told you."

"Bite me, buttwipe," Harry said. "This is all your fault anyway, you big puss."

As Wendy watched longingly after the boys, two whispering, giggling girls, with the hoods of their brand new Red River Park sweatshirts pulled up over their heads, slid into the vacated seat. Wendy guessed they were trying to keep their hair from getting messed up or something, but it seemed a little warm for long sleeves. Still, it was probably a good idea. Wendy wished she'd thought of bringing a hoody, just a lightweight one. Her hair was going to be totally wrecked. Though honestly, at this point she was far more worried about her nerves being wrecked.

Kevin slouched down in his seat beside her and crossed his arms, staring straight ahead. "Worst roller coaster ride... ever," he said.

"Hey Wednesday!" called a voice from up ahead.

She looked up. Jason was waving and grinning at her from the front car. It looked like he was standing on his seat. Even so, she could barely see him over the Lewis's massive shoulders. She waved back.

"Hey," shouted the attendant. "Sit down and strap in."

"Meet you at the end," Jason called, sitting down and disappearing from view.

Meet you at the end. For some reason, the words echoed unsettlingly in Wendy's ears, until Kevin pulled in his lap bar, then reached up and tugged down the shoulder restraints. Their harsh, clacking racket snapped her back into focus. She set the lap bar and pulled down her restraints. The padded, u-shaped bar fit snugly over her shoulders. Kevin tested his and she did the same. It was locked into place. There was no getting out now.

Two cars ahead of them, Lewis pulled his shoulder restraints down. They clicked into place, but when he tried to pull the lap bar forward it bumped up against his big gut and stopped. It wouldn't lock. He looked up, worried. The attendant was walking down the car, checking everybody. Lewis pulled the lap bar in with his elbows and leaned on it. He gave the attendant a big smile.

"Good to go, dude," Lewis said.

The attendant double-checked the bar. Lewis tightened his stomach. The bar didn't move. The attendant nodded and continued on to check Erin and Ian's restraints. Lewis breathed a sigh of relief and let the bar rise up a little. It still wasn't locked.

In front of him, Frank Cheek was leaning as far forward as he could, trying to talk to Ashley and Ashlyn. He reached out and stuck his digital video camera between their seats.

"Hey," he said. "I dare you two to flash your tits at the top of the loop."

Ashley and Ashlyn rolled their eyes dramatically.

Wendy raised her camera high over her head and aimed down the car. Ahead of her kids were waving their arms and shouting, "Let's go. Let's go!" If she was lucky she could get everyone in the train. She squeezed the shutter button. The flash flared.

The attendant, who had just checked their restraints, spun around. He glared at her, pointing to a sign. "Yo," he said. "Can't you read?" He started toward them.

Wendy looked at the sign, even though she already knew what it said. No loose objects. No cameras. Wendy shrunk in her seat as the attendant loomed over her.

Kevin took the camera from her and looked up at the attendant. "I'll put it in my pocket," he said. "All right?"

The attendant hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "Fine," he said.

Kevin stuffed the camera in the pocket of his loose cut cargo pants. Ahead of them, Frank looked back and stealthily slid his DV cam up under his T-shirt.

Satisfied that all was shipshape, the attendant started back toward his control panel. Kevin grinned and leaned forward, gripping the lap

bar in anticipation.

"Finally. This is going to..." he paused. "Aw, gross!"

He pulled his hand away from the bar, face scrunched up in disgust. A drooping line of bright pink chewing gum stretched from the bar to his palm. He tried to wipe it off on the side of the car.

The attendant stood at his console. He flipped up the clear plastic safety casing that covered the launch button, which glowed a jaunty green. He grinned and raised his hand over his head.

"And away we go," he cried, then pushed the button.

The twelve little cars jolted forward as the guide wheels began turning against the metal pipe track. Wendy was rocked forward and then back. The other passengers raised their arms over their heads and cheered. Kevin, having cleaned most of the gum off his hand, joined them, and elbowed Wendy in the arm.

"Come on, Wendy," he cried. "Get in the spirit. There's no stopping it now."

Wendy gave him a tight-lipped smile and half-heartedly raised her arms.

In the lead car, Jason leaned forward, eager and bright eyed. Beside him, Carrie smiled and gripped the overhead restraints with a happy tension. Eight cars back, Frank, now out of sight of the attendant, pulled his DV cam out of his shirt and started filming, holding it over his head, trying to frame both Ashley and Ashlyn, and the rising rails of the lift hill in the shot.

Wendy listened to the clacking of the gears as the cars slowly approached the climb. Then the train jerked to a stop at the base of the hill, eliciting nervous giggles and whoops from the riders. The rails rose above her like twin sword blades, two hundred and fifty feet above her head. It looked like they went all the way to the moon. A gear engaged beneath the car, and it resumed its slow ascent—*CLACK... CLACK... CLACK*. The car's angle increased sharply, pushing Wendy back in her seat. She felt like she was in the cockpit of a rocket on the launch pad. Her feeling of helplessness was almost overwhelming, but she did not want to disintegrate in front of Kevin.

She looked out to the side and saw the lights of the park falling away below her, and the starlit sky filling more and more of her

vision. They were fifteen stories up. Now sixteen. Seventeen. The car's angle became even steeper and the constant clacking became strained. She could see the summit approaching and clenched the shoulder restraints with white knuckles. Another ten seconds of agonizing tension and the car began to level off, twenty-five stories above the ground.

The cars slowed, stopped at the crest, and pitched slightly forward so that Wendy leaned into the restraints. She held her breath. The whole park was spread out below her. The flashing, whirling lights and colorful structures were a puddle of chaos in the darkness of the surrounding orchard. Beyond them, and spreading to the horizon, she could see the more ordered, sedate yellow glow of halogen-lit, suburban streets.

There was a hiss and a clang as the brakes released. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, the train began to roll forward. It edged into the downhill curve, forward angle increasing, and began picking up speed. Beside her, Kevin let out a rebel yell. The whole train echoed him—a unified screech of delighted terror.

In the front seat, Jason and Carrie clutched the lap bar, grinning and screaming like happy lunatics as the cars plunged down the fifty-degree incline and the wind ripped at their clothes. In car seven, Ashley and Ashlyn were pressed back in their seats, their eyes wide. Frank Cheek struggled to keep his camera in front of him and focused on the shrieking girls. Lewis held onto the lap bar. He almost seemed to be trying to steer the car with his massive arms. Erin and Ian sat, stoic and apparently calm, as the wind whipped their hair back from their faces. The only sign of nervousness they displayed was the fact that they held hands with bone crushing intensity. Wendy found she could not concentrate on anything but keeping herself together.

The train plunged on, corkscrewing slightly as it dropped, then hit the bottom of the first valley and roared up the second rise, a towering hill of steel almost as high as the first, but ascended in a fraction of the time. In spite of herself, the thrill of the speed and motion, and the sensation of her stomach rising inside her ribcage, was lifting Wendy's spirits. What a rush it was to fly like this, to have

all her earthbound cares fall away like the ground below her, and have her life be reduced to speed, wind and torque. She shrieked with joyful abandon.

Kevin grinned at her. "There you go," he shouted. "I knew you were going to love it."

She could barely hear him.

The cars reached the top of the second hill and banked into a sharp, descending turn. Inertia threw Wendy and the others into their restraints and they struggled to remain centered. Wendy looked ahead, and her giddy scream died in her throat as the rest of the coaster's track was revealed to her, twisting away like a gnarled vine. At the base of the hill the cars had just topped was the first loop, a hundred and eighty degree, fifty foot high, vertical circle of track.

Upside down, she thought. We're going upside down.

The presence of the restraints did not reassure her. The fact that thousands upon thousands of people had survived the trip before her did nothing to calm her terror. She was going to fall out of the car. She was going to die.

The train straightened out of the curve, then plummeted into the drop, racing for the loop. Jason and Carrie screamed, eyes bright. Kevin pumped his fists over his head. Wendy held the bar in a death grip. Frank pointed his camera toward the loop.

"Here it comes!" he shouted.

The tracks blurred as the car screamed into the up-turn.

The G-forces were incredible. Wendy was squashed down into her seat like some giant was flattening her with his palm. The world rotated around her as the cars rocketed up the inside curve of the loop. The passengers shrieked and howled like a single exhilarated entity. She squeezed her eyes shut, but not being able to see what was happening made it a billion times worse. She opened them again and tried to focus on the other riders.

Frank thrust his DV cam into Ashley and Ashlyn's car and between their seats. He turned it toward them.

"Now," he screamed. "Show me your tits."

Amazingly, Ashley seemed game. She grabbed the bottom of her flimsy top and started to pull it up, but she could barely move her

arms, and the restraints were in the way. She strained, but lost her grip, and her arm, pushed sideways by the wind, smashed into Frank's hand just as the train reached the apex of the loop and turned completely upside down. Jarred, Frank lost his grip on the camera and it tumbled from his hand. He made a desperate, pawing grab for it, but it bounced off his fingertips and spun away, dropping like a stone.

"Shit," said Frank.

Wendy's eyes squeezed shut as, upside down, her shoulders pressed against the top of the restraints. Lewis's eyes bugged out as his lap bar, which had never fully locked, began to open away from his stomach. He clutched at it, panicked, and tried to pull it in, but his arms fought against the centrifugal pull and lost. He clung instead to his shoulder restraints.

The cars started down the other half of the loop. Below them, Frank Cheek's camera smashed off the super-structure of the ride, glass and bits of metal flying, and bounced to a rest on the outgoing loop track. Its broken lens pointed directly toward the train, which barreled down at it at a hundred miles an hour.

The guide wheels bumped over the camera, crushing it, and were jolted out of position. Twisted, one of the four wheels wobbled furiously. The camera shot out from under the rubber wheels like a missile and ricocheted off the undercarriage of the cars. It hit a hydraulic piston right on the seam and split it. At rest, the tiny crack would have done nothing, but at the speed the car was moving, and with the incredible pressures it was under, it wrenched wide open and began jetting oil everywhere.

Jason and Carrie screamed, this time with real terror, as the car rocked back and forth and they were thrown against their shoulder restraints. Their screams turned to hysterical shrieks as the restraints, depressurized because of the broken hydraulic piston, released and rose up over their heads. And theirs weren't the only ones. All the shoulder restraints for the whole car released. The passengers grabbed desperately to pull them back down, but g-forces made it hard for them to raise their arms. Lewis, teeth bared and eyes huge with terror, held onto his broken shoulder restraint with

one hand and the lap bar that had never locked with the other. He was praying furiously in Spanish.

The cars roared out of the loop and into a low bump. Wendy clung to the lap bar as she rose out of her seat. Kevin tried to hold her in with one arm as he held on with the other. Her eyes widened as she saw, rushing toward them, a twisting corkscrew turn.

"Oh..."

Before she could say no, they were barreling into the rifled loop. Without being held in place by the shoulder restraints, she and Kevin were thrown violently from side to side. Her elbow cracked him in the face. Blood spurted from his split lip, spattering her T-shirt. In front of them, Erin and Ian smashed together in a chaos of black-clad limbs. The hoody-clad girls bounced like ragdolls. Upside down again and dazed, Kevin tried to hold himself and Wendy in the car, as gravity, like the claw of some immensely strong demon, fought to pull him loose and hurl him to the ground below.

Under the train, the wobbling guide wheel finally gave up the ghost and flew off. The axel dropped onto the metal track pipe, a spray of white sparks bathing the undercarriage of the car. The track groaned and shuddered with the unaccustomed strain. All over the ride, the support posts and beams shifted and swayed. Further down the track a pipe weld cracked.

Ashley, her breasts suddenly exposed as her top flapped up around her chin, banged painfully against Ashlyn, and then away again as the train screamed into a swooping "S" turn. The track dipped. At the front of the cars, Jason and Carrie held their arms in front of their faces as a shower of hot sparks bounced off them.

The train shot up a steep incline, then whiplashed into a sharp turn. With the guide wheel gone, the centrifugal force was too much, and as the train pulled sideways, the end of the lead car's axel slipped off the rail and jammed into the ties that held the tracks together. The speed and mass of the train were too much for this to stop it entirely, but the first cars shimmied and bucked as the axle tore through tie after tie.

At last, the torque twisted the car too far, and it popped off the track, continuing straight, while the track slewed left. Jason and

Carrie screamed in terror. The rest of the train began to follow suit, segmented cars popping off one by one and arcing after the first. As the rest of the train continued around the curve, and the derailed cars bent back on the others, the coupling between the eighth and ninth car snapped, ripping cables and hydraulic hoses. Lewis was slammed against the back of his seat, as the cars holding Frank Cheek and Ashley and Ashlyn plummeted off the right side of the rails, and headed for the ground.

The violence of the break caused Lewis to lose his grip on his loose restraints, and he bounced out of the car. Only a last second grab at the edge of the door saved him from falling. He clung to the outside of the car with all his strength, bellowing with terror. The sheet metal skin of the cab had torn when the coupling broke, and it was peeling back in the wind. It flapped violently, gashing Lewis's arms and face. Below him, the front eight cars smashed through support pipes and posts like they were twigs, and then piled into the ground and flattened, like an aluminum beer can being crushed on the forehead of a drunken jock.

The cars rocketed on, roaring up a low rise and then dropping suddenly. The force of the drop was too severe. Lewis lost his grip as the car jolted down, and he fell back as the remaining cars rushed by. Kevin saw Lewis's massive body flying toward him and instinctively let go of his restraints and reached out to catch him. He wrapped his arms around Lewis's body like he was sacking a quarterback, as the big jock slammed into him with a bone-crunching impact. Kevin gasped, all the wind knocked out of him.

Lewis clutched desperately at Kevin, cursing and shuddering, but his grip was slipping. He fell out of Kevin's arms, but managed to catch the side of Kevin and Wendy's car. His fingers were torn and bloody, and he struggled to keep his grip. Kevin leaned out of the car and grabbed the back of Lewis's baggy shorts, trying to pull him back in. Wendy held on to Kevin's waist, bracing him. But even with her help, Kevin couldn't get enough leverage. Lewis outweighed him by a good fifty pounds. Kevin grunted and strained, but couldn't pull the massive jock back in. Lewis tried desperately to pull himself up, and after a second, he gained a little purchase.

"Keep pulling," he shouted. "I'm almost..."

Before he could finish the sentence, the ripped sheet metal cowl from the first cab finally tore free and flew back. Lewis heard it flapping through the air like some sinister bird of prey, and looked forward, just in time for it to smash into him, chopping into his arms and forehead like a cleaver. With a terrified shriek, Lewis was knocked from the car and ripped from Kevin's grip. He fell, flailing, before being folded in half by smashing into a support beam. His lifeless body tumbled limply downward, plummeting four stories to the ground.

The broken cowl spun away, trailing pieces of the coupling assembly, bouncing off supports and smashing into the previously weakened pipe weld. The crack widened, torn apart by the reverberations that rippled up and down the tracks from the impact of the cowl and the devastation of the first nine cars ripping through the coaster's superstructure. Unable to withstand the unforeseen stresses being placed upon it, the weld ruptured completely and dropped, pulling a section of rails down with it, creating a three-inch drop in the track at the break. Above, what remained of the train hurtled on, sparks flying from the damaged front. It angled into a curve, then began a five-story drop, straight for the broken rails and the last loop of the ride, just beyond.

As the car shot down the curving decline, a torn end of hydraulic hose whipped out of the hole in the front car and flapped around, spraying oil everywhere. All the lap restraints released at once, rising away from the passengers.

Wendy gasped, breathlessly moaning.

"On no. Oh no, oh no."

She and Kevin braced their feet against the front of the car, clinging to the raised and wobbly shoulder restraints. The swift loss of altitude was lifting Ian and Erin from their seats. They clung to each other and the restraints.

The train hit the bottom of the hill at terminal velocity and the passengers were slammed back down in their seats. It roared over the three-inch drop in the broken track. Wendy and Kevin bounced

back and forth, banging each other with elbows and knees, but amazingly, the train stayed on the track.

Unfortunately, the three inch drop, at that speed, was enough to snap two of the guide wheels off the axel of the lead car, and the truncated train squealed under a low hanging support beam and up into the inbound curve of the big loop, grinding sparks from its axels. The friction began to slow it down, and just before it reached the apex of the loop it came to a stop, almost completely upside down, the few remaining guide wheels holding it to the track. Wendy and Kevin clung to the dangling shoulder restraints for dear life. Erin and Ian did the same, but Ian, seeing Erin slipping, reached out to catch her, and lost his own tenuous grip on the car instead. With a girlish scream, he plummeted toward the ground.

"Ian!" shrieked Erin. She reached down for him with one hand, and the fingers of the other slipped off the bar. She fell after him, a flapping, black taffeta missile that smashed into red ruin on the tracks below.

Wendy looked around, holding onto the shoulder restraints like a kid dangling from the monkey bars. Kevin dangled beside her. They had stopped. All was silent.

"Are we...?" she asked. "Is it over?"

Kevin swallowed. "Maybe," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Maybe if we just hang on..."

But just as he spoke, there was a deafening squeal of steel on steel, and the train began to slide back down the curve of the loop in reverse. As it picked up velocity and righted itself, Wendy was slammed back into the car, but a button on the sleeve of Kevin's varsity jacket was caught on the shoulder restraint, and he swung awkwardly from it, his feet just brushing the seat. He jerked on the button. It wouldn't rip.

"Fuck," he cursed, and standing on tiptoes, he tried to free his sleeve while the train hurtled blindly backwards. He couldn't get it off. He needed to be five inches higher. He pushed himself up on the lip of the roof. The button came free. A shape hurtling toward him made him look up. With a sudden, fearsome impact, the low hanging beam they had shot under earlier tore him into ragged bloody halves.

Wendy shrieked as hot gore sprayed her from head to foot, and Kevin's legs and lower torso flopped to the floor of the cab, her camera bouncing out of his pocket and skittering away. Wendy gagged and covered her eyes while behind her, Kevin's head, arms, and crushed and shattered chest slid off the pole and fell wetly to the ground. She was all alone, facing backwards as her hair whipped around her eyes in a speeding coaster train, with the severed legs of her dead boyfriend's best friend bleeding all over her shoes. Could things get any worse?

The train sped toward the long hill that it had raced down before. Just before the hill, at the low point of the valley, was the break in the track. Coming forward, it was a three-inch drop, but going backward, it was a three-inch rise, a steel curb. The wheels of Wendy's car—the last car—slammed into the raised tracks and stopped dead. Wendy was smashed into her seat with an impact that cracked her skull and shot blood from her nose and eyes. In front of her, three cars, all ominously empty, rose off the track and curled over her head like the tail of a scorpion, as inertia kept them moving.

Wendy's car was torn from the tracks and turned upside down as the other cars pulled it up and back. Only semi-conscious, as blood filled her brain-pan and shock started to close her body down, she saw the ground racing up at her in a red-tinged blur. The first car smashed into the concrete, then the second, then—

"Yo," the attendant said. "Can't you read?"

# FOUR

Wendy's head snapped up. She was sitting in the twelfth car, sweating and breathing hard. The train was still at the platform. Kevin was sitting beside her. The attendant was walking toward her, an angry scowl on his face, pointing at her camera. She looked up at him, uncomprehending and disoriented. He pointed at a sign. She turned her head, as if in a dream. The sign said "No loose objects. No cameras".

Kevin was reaching for the camera, but as he opened his mouth she already knew what he was going to say—I'll put it in my pocket, all right?

"I'll put it in my pocket, all right?"

The attendant hesitated, and then nodded. "Fine."

Kevin stuffed the camera in the pocket of his pants. Wendy's heart thudded in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. She raised her head and looked forward, confused and frightened. Ahead of them, Frank was lowering his DV cam and slipping it stealthily under his shirt. Wendy stared at him in horror as the attendant, satisfied that all was shipshape, started back toward his control panel.

Kevin grinned eagerly and started to lean forward. Wendy gasped and grabbed his hand, stopping him from squishing it into the gum that was stuck on the lap bar. Wendy gaped at the gum blankly as Kevin grinned at her.

"Hey, thanks," he said. "Good eye."

Wendy whimpered under her breath. This was more than déjà vu. She knew everything that was going to happen. They were going to crash. Frank Cheek was going to drop his camera and... Wendy turned her head from the gum to the attendant, who had returned to his console. He was flipping up the clear, plastic safety casing that covered the launch button, and raising his hand over his head.

"And away we go!" he cried, then stabbed a single finger down toward the button.

Wendy panicked, pushing desperately at her shoulder restraints.

"We need to get out of here!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE!"

The attendant's finger continued to move down toward the button, syrup slow and inevitable as a nightmare.

"No! NO! Don't push that button!" Wendy cried. "DON'T PUSH THAT BUTTON!"

The attendant's finger stopped an inch from the button. He looked up, making a scowling face.

"What the hell is this crap?" he asked in a gruff, sour voice.

His assistant looked over and saw Wendy struggling against her restraints. He sighed.

"Looks like we got a screamer," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

They started toward the twelfth car, the other passengers looking around to see what all the fuss was about.

Kevin stared at Wendy, pulling away from her, like she was infectious or insane.

"Let me off!" she was shouting. "Everybody needs to get off!"

"Wendy. Hey come on Wendy, it's all right," Kevin said, trying calm her down. He cringed, embarrassed as everybody looked their way. "Take it easy. It'll all be over before you know it."

Wendy shook her head, wild eyed.

"No," she cried. "It's going to crash. It's going to crash."

She knew how crazy she sounded, but she knew what was going to happen. She knew. She had to stop it.

"Okay, this is beyond a joke now," the attendant growled. "We can't have this kind of shit. Call security." His assistant nodded and turned back to the console, as the attendant continued towards Wendy's car.

In the front car, Jason struggled to turn around, but the restraints held him.

"Is that Wendy?" Wendy heard him ask. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," Carrie replied. "Sounds like her."

The other passengers in the train squirmed impatiently and shouted insults. The kids waiting in line to get on the next one mocked Wendy and shouted at the attendants to get a move on.

The attendant stopped beside Wendy, holding his hands out, placating.

"Listen," he said. "You're scaring the other passengers. If you don't stop screwing around, I'm going to have to take you off the ride, okay."

"Not just me, everybody needs to get off!" Wendy shouted, fending off Kevin's attempts to hold her back and shut her up. "The hydraulics are going to rupture. The tracks will collapse."

The attendant paused, shocked by the preciseness of the warning. He grimaced and looked back at his assistant, who nodded as he hung up the phone. He turned back to Wendy.

"Uh, that's pretty much out of nowhere," he said. "You know something we don't? Somebody call in a threat or something?"

"I just know. I..." Wendy's face fell. She knew what the attendant was going to say if she told him, but how else could she explain it. "I saw it. I saw it happen."

"It's okay, sir," said Kevin, trying to be the peacemaker. "She was just a little upset before. We're okay now."

Two heavy set, nylon-jacketed security guards, a big white guy whose embroidered name on the breast of his jacket read Colquitt, and an even bigger black guy with the unlikely name of Bludworth, hurried onto the platform from an emergency exit. The attendant whistled them over to Wendy's car and they crossed quickly, hands on their flashlights. The attendant turned away from Wendy to meet them.

"What's going on?" asked Colquitt.

The attendant jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "That chick is on dope or something," he muttered. "She's saying a bunch of weird shit about the coaster crashing. She's nuts."

Colquitt looked past the attendant to Wendy, who was clinging to Kevin's arm and shivering. The other passengers were shouting and whistling now. A chant started up toward the front and spread down the length of the car.

"Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!"

Colquitt bit his lip. "All right," he said. "Let her out."

The attendant turned back to his assistant. "Open up seven through twelve!" he called.

The assistant looked down at the console. There were two buttons, one labeled 1-6 and another labeled 7-12. He pressed 7-12, and all the restraints on cars seven through twelve released at once with a hiss of hydraulics. Lewis groaned with relief. Along with the rest of the freed passengers, Ashley and Ashlyn turned to look back at the commotion.

Frank Cheek grinned at the two girls and stuck his camera in their faces.

"So, want to do a little interview while we wait?" he asked. "What's your favorite sexual position?"

"Forget it, pervert," Ashley said.

Wendy leapt out of the car like it was on fire. Kevin followed reluctantly. Colquitt and Bludworth took Wendy's arms and led her off to the side. Kevin made to follow, but they waved him back. He crossed his arms and leaned on the car watching anxiously.

Colquitt looked Wendy in the eye. "All right, miss," he said, face grim. "You want to tell me what's the matter?"

"She was just a little upset before..." Kevin began.

He ignored Kevin completely. "Miss?"

Wendy hung her head. "I... I don't know," she said in a small, defeated voice. "I saw it... in my head. The... the track broke... The roller coaster crashed..."

Colquitt and Bludworth exchanged a blank glance. Colquitt sighed.

"Uh, you saw it?" He frowned. "You mean like a... psychic vision or something?"

"I know it sounds crazy," she said. "But I know it's going to crash. It's going to happen. You have to take everybody off."

"I'm sorry, miss," Bludworth said, shaking his big, bulldog head. "We don't shut down the rides without reasonable cause."

In the train, Frank Cheek focused in on Ashlyn.

"So," he asked. "You girls ever thought about, you know, fooling around together? I mean, you're both so hot. How could you resist?"

Ashley and Ashlyn exchanged disgusted looks.

"Let's ditch this loser," said Ashley.

"Hell yeah," said Ashlyn.

They hopped out of the car and started for the exit.

Frank stood up. "Hey!" he called. "Where you babes going? Wait a minute."

He scrambled after them, keeping them framed in the view screen of his DV cam as he ran out the exit.

Lewis looked over Ian and Erin's heads at Kevin, sneering. "Dude, what the hell's the matter with you?" Lewis said. "You need to control that bitch."

"Fuck off, Lewis," said Kevin. "Even if she was my girlfriend, which by the way she isn't, I'm not some fucking caveman like you."

Lewis failed to fuck off. He raised his voice to a girly squeak, mimicking Wendy.

"We're going to crash. We're going to crash." He grunted and returned to his normal voice. "She's probably trying to get some attention. Just like a bitch."

The two hooded girls slipped out of their car and away without a word, heads close together and exchanging whispers. Wendy looked down, embarrassed, but Kevin turned and started toward Lewis.

"Hey, enough already," Kevin said, face flushed and angry. "Leave her alone."

"What do you care?" Lewis asked. "I thought you said she wasn't your bitch."

"She isn't anybody's bitch," Kevin said. "And I said leave her alone."

Lewis's voice rose up into high-pitched baby talk again. "Leave her alone. Leave her alone." Lewis smirked. "You're starting to sound just like a bitch yourself, man."

"Fuck you," shouted Kevin.

Lewis stood up in the car. "Fuck me? Fuck you."

He pushed Kevin. Kevin grabbed for him, and Lewis blocked the grab with a sweeping left, accidentally backhanding Erin, who was cowering in the car behind him.

"Ow! You dick," she cried, hand up to a bright red mark on her paper white cheek.

"Fucker." Ian stood up and threw a weak punch at Lewis, who returned it with a wide haymaker. Ian ducked and grabbed Lewis's arm. Kevin took advantage and leapt on Lewis, throwing punches. Bludworth and Colquitt turned at the noise of the fight.

"What the hell?" said Bludworth.

Colquitt advanced, hefting his flashlight.

"Hey!" he called. "Break it up. Break it up."

The two security guards waded into the fight, trying to push the combatants out of the car. One of the passengers in the front half of the car started chanting a line from an old Ramones song.

"Hey! Ho! Let's go!" they cried. "Hey! Ho! Let's go!"

The rest of the riders picked it up.

"Hey! Ho! Let's go! Hey! Ho! Let's go!"

In car number one, Jason was turning and craning his neck, trying to see what was happening. All he could see were the tops of Kevin and Lewis's heads, and fists flying.

"Let me out," he cried. "Lewis, you asshole, get off him. I'll fuck you up."

Colquitt and Bludworth dragged and pushed Kevin, Ian and Lewis out of the cars, and shoved them to the ground. Kevin and Lewis kept slugging each other. Erin followed Ian, weeping. Wendy looked on with her hands over her mouth. Everybody who could was turning around and watching.

"Let me off," Jason was shouting. "Wendy. Kevin. Hang on, I'm coming."

Colquitt looked up from trying to hold Kevin and Lewis apart. He shook his head at the attendant. "No way," he said. "Don't let anybody else out. We don't need any more trouble." He scanned the cars and waved at the attendant. "Get the rest of them out of here. Start the ride."

"All right." The attendant nodded and then returned to the console.

"Hey! Ho! Let's go!" chanted the remaining riders.

"No! You can't!" screamed Wendy.

She started toward the attendant. Colquitt broke away from the scuffle and hustled after her. The attendant pushed the 7-12 button

and all the restraints on the empty seats closed at once.

"Let me off," bellowed Jason.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed Wendy. "The tracks are broken. The cars are going to crash."

She grabbed the attendant's arm. He shoved her back, and Colquitt caught her and pulled her away.

Wendy fought and squirmed fiercely against him.

"Don't," she begged. "Don't, please. Please!"

The attendant ignored her and pushed the button.

Wendy looked toward the front of the train as it jolted into motion. "JASON!" she shrieked, but she couldn't find his face.

The train disappeared into the tunnel. She sagged in Colquitt's arms.

Colquitt shook her, angry. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked. "You don't touch the equipment. You don't assault the staff. We could have you arrested."

Kevin stood up as Bludworth muscled Lewis up and pushed him, Erin and Ian toward the door. Kevin started toward Colquitt.

"Hey, ease up," he said. "Give her a break. She freaked out. Let her settle down. She'll be alright."

"Yeah," said Colquitt. "She'll settle down at home. And so will you." Colquitt grabbed Kevin's arm and turned him toward the exit. "You guys are eighty-sixed with all the rest."

He kicked open the emergency exit and pushed them through. They went down a short flight of steps to another door and went through that. They came out outside, right next to the superstructure of the roller coaster. One of the loops was right overhead. The half full train rocketed above them. Squeals of joy and excitement reached their ears.

"See," said Colquitt, sneering. "Everything's fine. It was just your imagination."

"Yeah, Wendy," said Kevin. "It's all right, see?"

Colquitt started to lead Wendy and Kevin away from the coaster. Suddenly the metal pillars of the superstructure groaned and shuddered, as if subject to unusual stress. The three of them turned simultaneously and looked up, trying to find the train in the clutter

of beams, posts and track. As they watched, it rose up over a hill. The front car was shooting up a huge plume of sparks.

Wendy's mouth dropped open in horror as she realized that her vision was really coming true.

"What the hell?" Colquitt said.

Kevin gaped with stunned disbelief. "No way," he whispered.

Colquitt's hands fell away from Wendy and Kevin's arms. Through the pipes, the three of them watched as the damaged car raced for the second loop. There was a scream of rending metal, and the crunch of horrifying mechanical impacts. Red and orange lights flickered. They flared off the slack contours of their stunned faces.

Wendy shrieked.

"JASON!"

# FIVE

Wendy sat, sleepless and numb, on the foot of her bed. It was 5:15am. She had not slept. In fact, she'd barely slept more than an hour at a stretch since the accident.

The accident. That word, accident, uttered so many times by officials, her parents, and the media that it no longer seemed to have any real meaning for Wendy. The details of that horrible night were alternately painfully vivid, then dull and distant, like something viewed underwater. Certain images stuck like shrapnel in her mind. One of Carrie's slutty shoes, wet with blood, lay on the ground next to an empty paper cup. The look of raw superstitious fear on Colquitt's face as he backed away from Wendy, wiping the hand that had touched her on his pant leg as if she were contagious. On the other hand, things that seemed important, like what happened to Kevin or how she got home from the park, were all a jittery blur of overlapping confusion.

That was fourteen days ago. Three hundred and twenty four endless hours that felt like centuries, during which Wendy moved like a silent sleepwalker through her house, while her mom and sister tiptoed around her and treated her like she was made of glass. Her sister cried constantly, flinging herself into a sobbing heap on the nearest piece of furniture at the least provocation, and acting almost as if she were more affected than Wendy by what had happened.

Her mother, Sophie, was well-meaning, but mostly ineffectual, prone to hysteria and fearful of everything she didn't understand. Unable, as always, to find a way to communicate with her distant and shell-shocked daughter, she had seized on food as the solution and went on a mad cooking spree. She followed Wendy around with carob brownies, whole wheat cheese sticks, fresh mango and a million other healthy treats, begging her to just have a little something to keep her strength up. The thought of eating anything repulsed Wendy, but she forced herself, if only to make her mother feel better.

Her father, on the other hand, was far more understanding. He and Wendy had always been close, often sneaking off together to dodge her mother's endless restrictions, and swearing each other to secrecy after watching a forbidden movie or eating unacceptable junk food. He was a quiet, thoughtful man who liked fixing things, and taught Wendy how to play cribbage. Julie was their mother's baby, but Wendy had always been her daddy's girl.

There was more to the father-daughter relationship than that, because Grant Christensen was also a Marine. He had been shipped off to the Gulf War when Wendy was a toddler, and baby Julie was still in the hospital from the first of her complex, open-heart surgeries. He'd taken a bullet in the right knee and received a medical discharge from the service less than six months later, but several of his closest friends had never made it home from Desert Storm.

When Wendy got back to the house that awful night, her mother had assaulted her with sobbing hysterics and hot, smothering embraces, clutching at Wendy and wailing. Her father had simply looked into her eyes and let her know without words that he understood.

Several days later, when Wendy was standing in the living room and staring, unseeing, at some flashy car commercial on the television, her father came in and sat down on the couch. He just sat there for a long, silent minute, watching the screen as the car commercial changed to a cereal commercial, and then spoke.

"It gets easier," he said. "I know it's hard to believe that now, when you're all locked down and frozen, but eventually time passes and it will be safe to feel again. For now, all you can do is live through each minute."

Wendy really hoped that he was right, but living through each minute was like living through an ice age. She couldn't sleep, but she really didn't feel awake either. Nothing seemed real. She felt like a big, dead puppet, just going through the motions. Everything she did seemed utterly pointless now that Jason was dead. The funerals were like a dream, distant and half remembered. Wendy had stood there as they lowered Jason into the ground, watching them shovel dirt

over the coffin, and remembering the strong, beautiful body that she would never have a chance to know.

She'd felt like some kind of impostor, like an automaton that moved only in simple, programmed, repetitive ways: nodding her head, accepting condolences from members of Jason's family that she had never met. Yes, I'm the girlfriend, she said, over and over until she wanted to scream. Jason's mother had collapsed into howling tears, and had to be supported by Kevin, but Wendy felt nothing. All of her emotions were frozen under six feet of ice. As the days dragged on, she lived in constant fear of that ice melting. Her vast, monstrous anguish and loss, once unleashed, would eat her alive.

So she stayed frozen. She took care of things, did chores, organized her desk, sought comfort in order. Her bedroom, her beloved little sanctuary where everything was exactly the way she liked it, now seemed like a meaningless prison full of things that no longer mattered. She found herself remembering how hard she had fought for the spare, modern, white on white look she'd wanted for her room. Julie had chosen an over-the-top, glittery, Middle Eastern brothel style for her room. To Wendy, it always looked like the aftermath of a catfight between drunken belly dancers, and she longed for simplicity and clean, precise lines in her own private space. Her mother had argued that white would be too hard to keep clean, but Wendy had insisted, and every surface of her little sanctuary was as immaculate and pristine as the day she had painted over the happy lions and giraffes of her childhood. Sitting there now, in the cool, pre-dawn hush, all her efforts seemed so irrelevant. The chaos that she sought to tame within the walls of her orderly, white sanctuary had finally won. All the obsessive compulsive magic in the world had been unable to stop it.

She had gone through the room the night before, like a sudden hurricane, struggling to eradicate anything that reminded her of Jason, any painful sparks that might melt her protective ice. There were so many things, so many memories. She had packed away the obvious stuff, the photos, a sweatshirt of his that he had let her borrow one night when she was cold, birthday cards, a stuffed bear

he gave her when she had the flu, and a postcard of Wednesday Addams from the old television series, cut into the shape of a heart.

It seemed like everywhere she turned there was something else waiting to ambush her with hot, painful memories. If only she could eliminate everything that reminded her of Jason, she could keep the tears from coming. She knew that if she started crying, she would never be able to stop. In her desperate and obsessive need to control her feelings by controlling her environment, she packed away every single thing she could find, but it was impossible to eliminate everything. Jason had been so much a part of her life. Everywhere her gaze fell, there was something that led her mind back to him. A light blue dress that he had always teased her about because he said it made her look like someone's mom. A framed photo of her dead grandmother that he always turned to the wall when he came over, because he said he thought the old gal didn't approve of him, and he didn't like her watching them. Wendy kept seeing herself push him away that afternoon on the lunch quad, telling him there would be plenty of time for kisses later. She had been wrong. There was no more "later" for Jason. For Wendy, on the other hand, later was just an endless dry stretch of empty frozen nothing.

In the chilly, pre-dawn darkness, she wished over and over that she had just kept her mouth shut, just stayed on that ride and died with Jason. Then it would all be over.

Wishing was useless. All she could do was get up, take a shower, brush her teeth and hair, and pick out clean clothes. Keep moving, keep busy and never let the ice melt.

Today was graduation day. She had not been back to school since the accident, and although Julie had offered to pick Wendy's diploma up for her, Wendy knew there were things she needed to take care of herself. She could not just stay locked in her room forever. Life went on, and she had to face the world eventually.

Wendy got up and started getting ready.

# SIX

Kevin found that he didn't need to be asleep to have nightmares. All he had to do was close his eyes. The flood of horror and carnage came back again and again, as vivid and awful as that night, the night of the accident.

When the coaster crashed, Kevin had cast off the clutching arms of the security guards and ran to the scene of the smoking wreck, out of some misguided idea that he could help, could save someone, anyone. That had been the worst mistake of his life.

The things he saw had been burned into his mind forever. He saw a girl's long, brown hair coiled around a jagged chunk of metal, a wet red flap of scalp on one end and a cute pink scrunchie on the other. He saw a meaty slab of ribs that looked just like ribs in a butcher shop, only they were all dirty on one side, and sitting incongruously beside a giant fiberglass ice cream cone that had split down the middle and fallen over. It had been hard to tell the difference between metal and bone. Everything was slick with blood and hydraulic fluid, and the fragments of broken coaster cars seemed moist, organic and violated. By comparison, the mechanical structures of the shattered human bodies seemed artificial and contrived.

When he finally found what was left of Carrie, Kevin only recognized her by the glint of crystal that dangled from her navel piercing. When he spotted it, it was half-buried in a messy stew of red, purple and black. There was a long, jagged, white bone sticking out that might have been a leg or maybe an arm, but he couldn't see anything that looked even remotely like a head. That's when the ill-advised, deep fried Snickers came back with a vengeance. The horrific stench of hot metal and burned plastic were mixed with the odors of death and blood, and the rich shitty stink of entrails. The stink wormed its way deep into Kevin's nostrils as he vomited again and again, kneeling in the bloody dust with tears streaming down his cheeks. When he was able to stand, someone tried to lead him away, someone in a uniform, but he would not go. He had to find Jay.

He searched through the wreckage in endless, frantic circles, but he never found anything that he could be sure was Jason. Just pieces, grisly, unrecognizable pieces, and ragged scraps of those stupid McKinley T-shirts, jaunty and ironic letters proclaiming "I Survived Devil's Flight!" It was all like some awful kind of joke. He kept telling himself that maybe Jay was okay somehow; maybe he was alive and taken away by an ambulance or something. Then the thought of Jay made him think of Wendy. He had promised Jason that he'd take care of Wendy, and then he'd left her alone. He ran back to where they'd been standing, but she was gone. The last thing he remembered was half sitting, half falling down on his ass on the tarmac with his arms wrapped around his shaking body. He must have been crying, because his cheeks felt wet, but he couldn't hear anything. It was as if his head was stuffed with cotton. The next thing he remembered was being home, sitting on the couch with his dad and mom and three brothers, all stiff and static, placed like ceramic figures in a drug store nativity scene.

"Buck up, son," his father had said. "Be glad you got off."

No one else said anything, and eventually Kevin got up and went into his room. He could tell that his family was more embarrassed by his anguish and grief than anything else. They wanted him to feel better, not so much because they loved him, but because then the whole uncomfortable business of dealing with his untidy emotions would be over with.

Kevin's family had always revolved around his father. His father was a stout, blue collar, bull of a man who had brought himself up by his bootstraps and now owned his own custom shelving business. He despised displays of emotion or other signs of weakness, so the entire family habitually avoided that sort of unpleasantness. Living with Kent Fischer was like living under a shaky military truce. So long as no one broke the rules, you could almost pretend everything was okay.

Kevin could not let his father see him cry, but tears were never far from the surface. The pain of losing sweet, saucy little Carrie and his best and oldest friend in one freakish accident was more than Kevin could handle. Everything he saw or did reminded him of one or the

other, tearing off the fresh scab over and over so it never had a second to heal. He spent that first weekend locked in his room, beating his fists against his pillow and hating himself for being so weak. He thought of Carrie scolding him about telling her to take the backseat with Wendy. He should have insisted; then she would still be alive.

He missed Carrie so badly, her smell and her laugh, the comfort of her warm little body curled against his and her earthy, voracious carnality, but any thoughts or feelings that were even remotely sexual filled him with tortured confusion and anguish. If he thought of someone else, he was instantly torn by a swift and powerful shame, as if he were cheating on Carrie. If he thought of Carrie, he would be crushed by sadness and depression and the loss of the future they would never have together, or worse, haunted by the horrific memory of finding her ruined, bloody remains.

And in the end, the thing that obsessed him night and day, the thing he could not get out of his head, was everything he had done wrong that night. Why hadn't he done something more to save Carrie? Why hadn't he listened to Wendy and lent his voice to hers to get Jay and Carrie off the doomed ride? But deeper and more disturbing than that, was the question of how Wendy had known the ride would crash.

Time passed, but it never got easier. The hurt just matured, like wine, growing darker and more potent. He went back to school, just to have something to do, but he found he could no longer relate to any of his friends, callow jocks who all just wanted to punch him in the shoulder and laugh it off. They even talked about hooking him up with some slut they knew who had no gag reflex and would make him forget all about the whole thing.

In a surprising show of compassion, Kevin's father had agreed to let Kevin keep Jason's dog, a goofy boxer bulldog mix named Betsy. Jason's mom could barely take care of herself in the aftermath of the accident, and her sister wanted to take Betsy to the pound. He couldn't let that happen. Kevin thought his father was going to wig out about it, but instead he just nodded, patted Betsy's head and said, "I like a bulldog."

Dumb, sweet Betsy made things a little easier for Kevin. She seemed to have no idea that anything was amiss. Just when Kevin would think the pain and grief was going to crack his skull wide open and splatter the walls with his tortured brains, Betsy would come over and put some disgusting, slobbery squeaky toy in his lap. She would look up at him with that smushed face and crooked goofy underbite, and he would have to laugh. She made the passing days almost bearable.

Graduation had snuck up on him. It seemed impossible to Kevin that two whole weeks had passed, and yet here it was, the night before graduation. Everyday things were continuing to happen all over the world, things that Jason and Carrie would never see. News events were taking place that they would never know about. New songs hit the charts, songs they would never hear. Movies came out that they would never watch. It seemed so horrendously unfair. Sleepless and wired, and tormented with unrelenting guilt and sadness, Kevin found himself poking around online, looking up information on precognition, psychic visions, and anything that might give him some kind of insight into what had really taken place that night. What he found chilled him deeply. He knew he had to find Wendy and talk to her about the things he had uncovered. She was the only one who would understand.

# SEVEN

It was raining, a soft, steady patter, streaking the dusty gray windows that served to break up the monotony of the long, locker-lined school hallway. It was the last day of school and the building was nearly deserted; only the occasional junior scurried past for a last minute final. Wendy drifted through the halls as quiet and pale as a ghost. She had a gold embossed envelope in her numb fingers. Inside would be her diploma. She hadn't even bothered to look at it.

Wendy passed a colorful, student-made memorial shrine to the victims of the crash, but refused to look at that either. She had seen it once before on her way to pick up her diploma. She didn't need to see it again. She didn't need all their eyes looking out at her, happy cheerful eyes that never imagined they wouldn't make it to graduation.

The shrine was a collection of photos, pasted to white poster board and surrounded by hand written notes, flowers and candles, all sitting on top of an old trophy case. Jason, who had been one of the most popular boys in the school because of his athletic prowess and outgoing personality, had the biggest picture—the flawless, posed photo that would have been his yearbook picture—in the center position. Wendy knew how strong and handsome and alive he looked in that picture. She didn't have to look again. His picture was surrounded by shots of the others who had died in the crash—Carrie among them—all smiling out from their cheesy yearbook photos as if nothing bad could ever happen to them.

She continued down the hall until she reached her locker. She fumbled with the lock and yanked it open. A picture of Jason was taped to the inside of the door. This was not a stiff, posed shot like the one that had been chosen for the shrine. This was a laughing, candid photo that Wendy had taken herself. Jason was roughhousing with his dog Betsy, and the dog had managed to sneak her blocky, tan head up through Jason's defending arms. She had plastered her sloppy, pink tongue across his cheek, right at the moment that the shutter clicked. Wendy didn't look at the photo. Tucking the gold

embossed envelope under her chin, she began pulling her belongings out of the locker—books, sweaters, gym clothes, sneakers, notebooks, her pencil box—and gathering them up in her arms. She stepped back and almost closed the door, then, still without looking at it, she pulled the picture of Jason off the door and put it face down on top of the pile. She hip checked the locker door closed, then started back down the hall.

Wendy passed the memorial shrine again, but then slowed, awash with a sudden chilly dread. She stopped, hesitant and conflicted, then looked up at the shrine. Jason smiled down from his oversize picture. Wendy cursed herself and clenched her teeth. She could feel the sadness beneath her frozen shell scrabbling to get out.

The glass-encased candle at the center of the shrine was flickering, as if a mischievous wind were toying with it, even though all the others burned straight and high. She frowned at it and it blew out, a gray curl of smoke rising up from it, inexplicably sinister, like a cobra rising from a basket.

Unnerved and confused, Wendy backed away from the shrine. She turned, crossed to a trashcan and dumped all the stuff from her locker into it. Jason's picture fluttered to the bottom after the rest. She had to force herself not to snatch it out again. This was closure. This was the end of a chapter in her life. She didn't need to carry any of her old life with her when she moved on. All she needed was the diploma in the gold embossed envelope, her ticket to Yale, to a new life. It was time for new beginnings. Time to bury the toxic tangle of painful emotions deep inside her, until they froze to death.

She turned deliberately away from the trashcan and started resolutely down the hall. Behind her she heard a voice.

"Wendy?"

It was Kevin. She recognized his voice, but she didn't want to talk to him right now. She didn't want to talk to anybody. She sighed as she heard his footsteps following her. She pushed through the double doors at the end of the hallway and stepped out into the wet, gray lunch quad.

Raindrops rippled the puddles that grew in the cracks of the concrete. Under the shelter of the small, covered area by the water

fountains, a group of students sat around one of the orange cement tables and signed each other's yearbooks. Wendy saw them and steeled herself. They were the survivors, the ones that had got off the roller coaster before the crash. She would have to walk past them to get the parking lot, and she hoped none of them would call her over.

Though divided by their membership to different cliques and by their varying social status, the crash and its aftermath had drawn the survivors together. This was partly due to the typical uneasy comradeship shared by those who had survived a common tragedy. Partly, it was because the other students had become shy about talking to them and had begun to shun them. Wendy knew this wasn't because of a lack of sympathy on the student body's part, but rather because of an excess of sympathy that made them excruciatingly uncomfortable. It was hard to know what to say. At what point was it appropriate to stop saying how sorry you were and to start joking again? How did you keep the superstitious fear out of your eyes when you spoke to someone who had given Death the slip? The students had solved this uncomfortable dilemma by not talking to the survivors at all, and consequently, they had drawn together as a group. Strangely, Wendy's sister Julie had taken to hanging on the edges of the group. She was there now, sitting with her friends, Perry and Amber.

Wendy didn't join them because it was a group she didn't want to be a part of. She didn't want to talk about the crash. She didn't want to relive it. She didn't want to try to answer the questions everyone asked about how she knew the crash was going to happen, and the darker, unasked questions that burned in their eyes. She didn't need to talk. She was just here to clean out her locker and pick up her diploma.

Julie looked up from paging listlessly through the yearbook as her sister passed. Wendy frowned. Why was Julie hanging around with the survivors? It was almost like she was there as a weird sort of stand-in for Wendy.

"What is she doing here?" Wendy overheard her sister ask no one in particular. "Wendy said she'd never come back to this place. I told her I'd pick up her diploma for her."

Ian McKinley, who sat near Julie and Erin, looked up from writing his first name above the gold leaf raised letters of "McKinley Senior High" on the yearbook cover. He shrugged and looked back down at his work.

"I hate my stupid name," he said, crossing out the word "McKinley" on the cover and writing Equinox instead. "As soon as I turn eighteen, I'm changing it to Ian Equinox."

"Equinox?" Lewis said. "Dude, that's totally queer."

"Won't your family cut you out of the will if you do that?" Erin asked. "The McKinleys have owned this useless burg, lock stock and barrel, for three hundred years. You may be a black sheep, but you're still the only heir."

Ian made a disgusted face. "What do you care?" he said. "Fuck 'em and fuck their money. They don't own me. They hold all that money over me like it's the most important thing on earth, but do they ever give me a cent? Do they send me to a decent school? No. I'm stuck here with the peasants at McKinley High, driving a shitty car and working a shitty job for minimum wage just to get by, to build character' as my old man likes to say."

He began drawing an old, World War Two style bomb, dropping out of the sky toward the gold printed, line drawing of the school on the cover of the yearbook.

"You better watch it with that kind of shit," Erin said, frowning at the drawing. "If the school Gestapo sees that, they'll claim it's a bomb threat and make you disappear."

Ian shook his head wearily and transformed the cartoon bomb into a fat hotdog on a bun with the caption "Just eat it!"

"No sense of humor in this happy little post-Columbine world we live in," he said.

Across the table, Lewis, in his usual black and silver sports gear, was drawing too. He hunched over his graduation cap, a look of intense concentration on his face, as he used a silver gel pen to painstakingly draw the Oakland Raiders' helmeted skull and crossed swords logo on the mortarboard.

Next to him, Ashley and Ashlyn were both writing in the same yearbook, using black sharpies and putting hearts over every "I" in

their words.

Frank Cheek slid in beside Ashley and pushed her open yearbook over to her, smirking.

"Here you go," he said. "I drew a picture too."

Ashley glanced blankly at the open page and did a double take. Her jaw dropped.

"Oh," she said, grabbing the book and scrubbing out the offending words and pictures with her sharpie. "You are so sick. I have to show this to my mother."

Frank's eyes lit up. "I've seen your mom," he said. "She's a total MILF."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Ashlyn asked.

"You know," Frank replied. "Em-Eye-El-Eff. Mom I'd Like to—"

Ashley cut him off, face twisted with disgust. "Oh gross. God. Get away from us."

Julie watched as Mr Smith, the eleventh grade social studies teacher and staff advisor to the yearbook committee, hurried out after Wendy, hunching in the light rain. He called after her.

"Ah... Wendy?"

Wendy turned, reluctant to stop.

Mr Smith caught up with her, puffing and red from the effort of pushing his chubby short legs to catch her. He looked more than a little uncomfortable talking to her, like everyone was these days.

"Hi, Wendy," he said. "Sorry to bring this up. I know things have been... well... difficult lately, and I don't fault you for forgetting things, but... um... would it be possible to return the yearbook camera today?"

Wendy nodded and turned back to continue toward the parking lot. "It's possible," she replied.

She could tell that Mr Smith was irritated by her non-committal answer, but was reluctant to scold her because of what had happened. Did everyone on earth think she was some poor, fragile little victim, who needed handling with kid gloves or she would wig out and start predicting more deaths?

Behind them, Kevin Fischer came out of the school. Wendy saw him scanning the quad and her heart sank when he spotted her. He

started trotting after her.

Great, she thought. Now what?

Mr Smith frowned, not pleased, but still trying to put his displeasure in the safest most nonthreatening terms.

"Wendy, listen," he said. "I'm not trying to..."

"I'm sorry, Mr Smith," Wendy cut in. "I'll have Julie bring it back in the next day or two, okay?"

"Thank you, Wendy," Mr Smith replied, sounding as if he had somehow dodged a bullet. "Good luck at Yale."

Wendy didn't answer. Mr Smith could not seem to get away from her fast enough. She sighed and continued on toward the parking lot. She passed only a few feet from the table where Julie and the crash survivors were sitting, but she didn't look their way. She didn't get five steps before Kevin finally caught up to her.

"Wendy," he said, sounding slightly hurt. "I was calling you."

She didn't slow down. "I know," she said. "I heard you."

"I just..." He faltered. "I want to talk to you."

She shook her head. "I gotta get back home," she said. "I just came here to pick up my diploma."

She held up the gold embossed envelope like it was some kind of protective shield.

"So you're not going to graduation tonight?" Kevin asked.

She shook her head, a terse, dismissive motion. "No."

Kevin reached out and took her arm, turning her around to face him. Wendy clenched her teeth and fists. Couldn't he take a hint? She glared at him, ready to give him a piece of her mind, but the look in his eyes made her pause. He had a serious side to him that she had never seen before. The goofy, jock clown he had been before the crash was submerged, buried. There was stony grief and a new kind of maturity in his wide, solemn face. He had seen bad things, and it had changed him, made an adult out of him in one terrible night.

She still didn't want to talk to him. She knew all about it, how terrible it had been. He couldn't tell her anything she didn't already know about growing up too fast.

"You're not the only one in a fucked up place, Wendy," he said. "We're all devastated. It might be good to be with some people who

are going through the same bad shit..."

"At graduation?" Wendy interrupted. "What could feel good about sitting around in ugly gowns and goofy hats, listening to solemn, bullshit speeches about how a part of our lives are over and it's time to turn the page? I had enough of that at the funerals. I've already turned the page. I'm already gone. You're looking at a ghost."

The kids at the covered table looked up, listening, curious.

"Fine," Kevin said. "So don't do it for yourself. Do it for Jason and Carrie. It's their graduation too."

"Do what for them?" Wendy asked, impatient. "It's not like they're going to be pissed if I don't go. If you die and there's nothing, then they're just dead and they don't know either way. If they're in heaven with Lincoln and Gandhi and John Lennon, you think they're going to care about our stupid little high school graduation?"

Kevin looked offended at her lack of sentiment. "Well," he said. "It wouldn't hurt to honor them, you know."

"And I already honored them at their funerals, and everybody else's funerals. I've done all the honoring and remembering I'm going to do. I'm done. I'm alive. That's all I care about. Once I pull out of that parking lot, I am so out of McKinley it isn't even funny. Without Jason, what else is there here for me?"

Wendy saw Julie look away, hurt. Wendy didn't mean to cut her sister and her parents off along with all the rest of the town. She just couldn't help it. It was the only way she knew to stay sane, to keep everyone and everything at arms length.

Kevin frowned too. He tapped the center of his broad chest with one hand. "I'm here," he said. "I made a promise to Jay that I would take care of you. I don't back out on promises."

Wendy rolled her eyes. "Come on," she said. "You made a promise to take care of me on the ride. For three minutes. You weren't making a promise for a lifetime."

Kevin looked away, embarrassed. "That's not the point," he said. "I owe it to Jay. I don't want to fuck up again and not help you when I should have..."

Wendy sighed. "Kevin," she said. "Trust me, I'm fine. You don't have to do this. Listen..." She paused, uncomfortable. "I don't mean

to be cold, but the truth is that if it wasn't for you being Jay's best friend and me being his girlfriend, you and me wouldn't really have hung out. We don't even like each other."

Kevin's brow scrunched up. For a second he looked almost crushed, but then he laughed and shrugged it off. "Yeah," he said. "I guess you're right."

Wendy nodded, but she could see that he didn't mean it, that he really did seem to care for her in his own strange way. She also saw how deeply Jason's death had hurt him, almost more so than Carrie's. They had been best friends since they were little kids.

"Look," she said. "I appreciate the gesture, Kevin, really I do. But I'm telling you I'll be fine. I've moved on and I suggest you do the same."

She turned and started for the parking lot again. Kevin sighed and stared after her.

From the knot of students at the covered table, Julie called out to Wendy.

"That was pretty harsh there, Wendy," she said. "Why are you acting like you're blowing him off when the only reason you came down here is 'cause you were looking for someone to talk to? Now Kevin wants to talk and you just want to blow him off."

Wendy turned, angry. She held up her envelope. "I just came to get my diploma," she said. "That's all."

The survivors looked at her, wary but respectful. She had saved their lives, after all, but it was still really weird and creepy.

"Uh-huh," said Julie. "And yesterday you asked me to pick it up so you wouldn't have to. And I said I would, and your stuff. Now you're here, when you knew a bunch of us would be. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out."

Wendy froze. She flushed, feeling everyone's eyes on her. She hadn't thought of it that way. She wasn't really sure why she had decided to come down, instead of waiting for her sister to bring her stuff and her diploma home. There was something about not wanting to bring all that stuff, especially that last photo of Jason, into the house. But maybe it had just been a lame excuse. Maybe she really did want to talk.

"So why are you chickening out now that you've come all the way down here?" asked Julie, unwilling to back down. "Are you afraid to deal?"

"Can you blame her?" asked Frank Cheek, with what, for him, sounded almost like real concern and sympathy. "I mean, the only answer for what happened to her has got to be some fucked up demonic shit."

Wendy tensed, her fists clenching, as the others erupted in laughter and protest. Kevin looked like he wanted to come to Wendy's defence and kill them all, but he said nothing.

"Shut up, freak," said Ashlyn, shoving Frank.

"Yeah, loser," said Ashley.

"You know you're, like, not even supposed to be on campus," Ashlyn said.

"I'm a part of this too," Frank said.

"Whatever..." Ashley said.

Ashley leaned in to Ashlyn and the two of them began whispering excitedly.

"What happened to Wendy was purely psycho-logical," Erin said, looking up from her yearbook.

Ian nodded. "Exactly," he replied. "It's got absolutely nothing to do with the paranormal or occult practices of any kind."

Lewis laughed and shook his head. "That's pretty funny coming from a couple of devil worshipers," he said.

"It's all so black and white with you sheep," Ian sneered. "Satanism is nothing but dyslexic Christianity. We are not devil worshipers. We are atheist rationalists who practice wiccan rituals for the clarity of mind and purpose the ceremonies bring."

"Whatever," Lewis said. "You guys are messing with stuff that ain't right. That's a fact. For all we know your evil, idol worshiping rituals are what caused the accident."

"Fuck you, Jock-For-Jesus!" Ian said. "We don't need that kind of superstitious bullshit right now."

"Maybe he's right," Frank said.

"Oh great," Erin said. "What? Do you guys want to burn us at the stake now? Don't you see how crazy this is?"

"Hey listen," said Kevin, trying to talk over the clamor. "There's something I think you all should hear. I went online and came across a... a story about a situation a lot like ours that we all should know about."

No one listened to him. They were too busy shouting at Erin and Ian, who were too busy shouting back.

"Can I say something?" Wendy asked.

Nobody was listening to her either. Her jaw clenched. She was seriously beginning to regret coming in to school at all. Kevin stepped toward her, but before he could reach her, Ashlyn and Ashley stood up and cut him off.

"Um, Wendy," Ashley said. "Uh, we wanted to ask you..."

"Um," Ashlyn continued. "After this, we're going to get ready for graduation tonight at the tanning salon, you know, 'cause we want to look our best, and stuff, and..."

"And, we just wanted you to know," said Ashley, "that we are, like, so totally fine if you want to go with us and just, like, hang out and talk about, you know, stuff. So..."

"So, anyway," finished Ashlyn, handing Wendy a piece of paper. "Here's my cell number. We're going to be there around five."

Wendy nodded absently. She hadn't really heard them at all, and she crumpled the number in her fist as she listened to the others. They seemed to have dropped the Satanism argument and were now discussing her as if she wasn't standing right there.

"Can I say something?" she repeated. No one was listening.

"It's called pareidol," Ian said, sounding like a snooty professor. "A vague stimulus being perceived as something clear and distinct."

Kevin turned, sucked into the conversation again. "I don't see what..." he began.

Lewis cut him off. "Vague?" he said. "Before the ride, the bitch was sayin' the roller coaster would crash, and it did. She said the hydraulics would go, and they did. She said the track would break, and it did. How is that shit vague?"

"Look," Frank said. "I'm not saying she meant to do it. I'm not saying that she's demonic or anything, but maybe she..."

Erin laughed. "Please," she said. "Tell me he's not about to say that she was possessed."

Frank's face fell, embarrassed, as if that was exactly what he was going to say. He shrugged. "Yeah, well, whatever," he said. "It was out of her control, is all I'm saying."

Wendy twitched when Frank said the word control. Jason had been talking about her control issues right before they had gotten on the ride. He had said that she didn't want to ride the roller coaster because she had a fear of losing control, and now Frank was saying that she seemed to be out of control of her own mind. Had something else invaded her mind? Had something outside her self given her the warning? Had something forced her to see those things, to try to get everybody off the coaster? She had certainly never felt anything like it before. She had never had premonitions or any unexplainable feelings of wrongness before. She was a normal girl, with a normal brain. Wasn't she?

Suddenly she couldn't stand to be in the presence of the others. She turned and started for the parking lot again. The survivors were bringing up all the questions and worries she had successfully tamped down and locked away behind her armor of ice. Maybe Julie was right. Maybe she had come to talk it out, but now that she was faced with the reality of the situation, it was too much. She was overwhelmed. She had to bail.

She reached in her pocket, fishing for her keys as she approached her Ford Ranger half ton. Footsteps were coming up behind her. She didn't look around.

"Wendy."

It was Kevin. She opened the door of the truck and got in. Her hand trembled as she stuck the key in the ignition. She reached out to pull the door closed, but Kevin's hand stopped it and held it open. She flushed, angry, and turned to look at him, about to tell him to get away from her.

He looked into her eyes, intense. "Wendy. Listen to me," he said. "You are not alone."

Wendy slumped back in her seat, too weary to fight him. She turned the key and started the engine. "Kevin, I know you're trying to

be nice, and I appreciate everybody trying to help, I totally do, but..."

"No," he said, cutting her off. "Listen to me. I'm not talking about us. I'm talking about other people who had the same experience you had."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Now he seemed hesitant, as if embarrassed by what he wanted to say. "It..." He looked down and hunched his shoulders, hands stuffed deep in his pockets. "It's happened before."

"What's happened before?" Wendy asked.

Kevin raked nervous fingers through his hair and looked back over his shoulder at the arguing survivors.

"I... well...." He looked down at his sneakers. "I went online, looking for an explanation for what happened to you, 'cause it freaked me out and I just couldn't get it out of my head."

"It freaked you out?" Wendy said, dryly.

Kevin continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I found out about this high school French class in New York that was taking a plane trip to Paris, six years ago," he said. "When they were getting on the plane, this one kid had a vision that the plane was going blow up. Exactly the same sort of thing that happened to you the night of the roller coaster crash. He freaked out, just like you, and seven people were taken off the plane. Just like us."

Wendy listened, staring blankly at the steering wheel.

"On take off," Kevin said, "Flight 180 blew up."

Wendy bit her lip. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear this after all.

"Okay, that's freaky and all, Kevin," she said. "But what does it matter if somebody else saw some big accident was going to happen? Knowing this isn't going to change anything. I can't go back and stop the crash, can I?"

"I'm not done," Kevin said. "There's more."

"Okay, fine," sighed Wendy. "I guess I'm not getting out of here until you finish."

Kevin leaned in, lowering his voice. "This is the freaky part," he said. "Over the next few months, everyone who got off the plane and escaped the crash died in weird accidents. And not just that, they

died in the exact order they would have if they had stayed on the plane. And there was another situation, a few years later..."

Wendy's heart lurched. She had almost been taken in. Kevin seemed so serious. What was she thinking? Why would she imagine he had changed?

"Fuck you, Kevin," she said, putting the truck in gear. "Always got to be the joker. Well, it's not funny."

She reached out and slammed the door shut. Kevin jumped back as Wendy peeled the car backwards out of its space, then jammed it into drive and roared out of the lot. Kevin stared after her, a look of worry and fear on his face. Behind him, lightning crashed, and the light rain became a torrential downpour. Kevin hunched his shoulders and ran for the sheltered table.

# EIGHT

Ashlyn was at Ashley's house, getting ready for their trip to the tanning salon. Ashley's dad, Fredrick Freund, was a fitness guru with a whole set of workout tapes, patented devices to blast the fat off your butt, tummy or thighs, and special shakes and supplements to help you get all ripped and hot. Her mom, Tawny, was a retired fitness model who had made green posing in athletic shoes, artificial sweat and little else.

At forty-two, Tawny still looked amazingly flawless, more taut and toned than most of the girls at McKinley High. Whenever she went shopping with Ashley, men would ask if they were sisters. She and Ashley's father met when she got hired to demonstrate the Glute-Sculptor 2000 in one of his infomercials. It was love at first squat-thrust and they had been together ever since.

Ashlyn had always been just a little jealous of Ashley's idyllic home life. Her parents were loaded; her house was practically a mansion, everything straight out of some all American TV fairy tale. Ashlyn, on the other hand, was not so lucky.

It was not like she was poor or anything. Her dad didn't beat her or try to touch her boobs. He was just never around. He was some sort of businessman, working for a company that did mysterious computer stuff, and he worked late all the time. Ashlyn's mom had died giving birth to her, so she was nothing but glassed-in photo on the mantle, a gorgeous, smiling woman, unknowable and lost in the past. Ashlyn's stepmom, Deirdre, was nice enough, but she had two little girls of her own to worry about, and somehow Ashlyn always got lost in the shuffle.

Ever since they'd met in their freshman year at McKinley High, Ashley and Ashlyn had spent nearly every waking hour together. Ashley's mom and dad treated Ashlyn like a second daughter and would joking refer to the girls as "the twins." They even went so far as to designate one of the guest bedrooms as Ashlyn's, a spacious, sunny room with chic, designer furnishings and her very own bathroom. She had more of her stuff over there than she did back at

her own house. After all, back home she had to share a room and a single closet with her sister Tyler. At the Freund house, she had plenty of space to stretch out: Sometimes, Ashlyn would fantasize about her whole family dying in some quick, painless accident, and being officially adopted by the Freunds.

"What are you gonna wear to graduation, Lyn?" Ashley asked, pawing through the colorful chaos of her closet.

"Dunno, Lee," Ashlyn replied. "How about you?"

"Well, the gowns are that totally dull, boring, hunter green, preppy dog bed color," Ashley said, making a sour face. "So I'd say red would be out of the question."

"Too Christmassy," Ashlyn agreed. "How about that cute, sheer, mint green, kind of retro, Stevie Nicks dress with the plunging neck and the handkerchief hemline? Kind of breezy, bohemian sexy, but still dressy enough for a formal graduation."

Ashley took out the dress Ashlyn mentioned and held it up to her body. "Nah," she said. "Too flower child. I want to look put together. Classy, but still hot."

"Basic black?" Ashlyn asked, thumbing casually through an issue of Vogue. "You can't go wrong with basic black."

"You're a fashion genius, Lyn," Ashley said, pulling out a scrap of a little black dress and holding it up in triumphant victory. "Little black dress and a tan. Perfect."

"Speaking of tans," Ashlyn said, looking at her trendy little watch. "We better get going or we'll be late for our appointment."

"Yeah," Ashley replied, pulling her skirt up over her long, sleek thighs. "My legs are so white I look like a total dead person."

"You don't want to be mistaken for that freaky Erin Ulmer," Ashlyn said.

"Yeah, right," Ashley said. "Only if I gained a million pounds and had, like, a total fashion lobotomy."

Ashlyn giggled at the thought of a fashion lobotomy. It seemed like so many of the girls at McKinley High had been given that treatment. Take that Wendy Christensen. She was a pretty girl, but she didn't take any time to fix herself up. Ashlyn was glad they had invited her to join them in the tanning salon. Wendy would look so much

prettier with a little color, and she might even be willing to accept some tips on her overall look. Ashlyn always worked very hard to keep up with all the latest styles, though truth be told, she knew that she and Ashley could show up in burlap sacks with brown paper bags over their heads and the boys would still be all over them. Still, not everyone was so lucky, and she had to make an effort to help those who were less fortunate. Not to mention the whole creepy thing with Devil's Flight and all.

Ashlyn had to put that thought right out of her mind. There was no point in dwelling on bad things and getting all negative. They had their graduation to think of. It was important for them to look as good as possible, in honor of the students who would not be graduating.

"Earth to Lyn," Ashley was saying. "Come in, space cadet."

"Sorry, Lee," Ashlyn said. "I was just wondering if Wendy would call us." She checked her cell. No messages.

"Don't worry, Lyn," Ashley said. "It was the thought that counts, right?"

Ashlyn nodded. "Right, sure," she said. "Let's go."

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Ashley and Ashlyn pulled into the mini-mall parking lot in Ashley's lowered and modded out Acura RSX, and parked in front of the bright windows of the California Sun Tanning Salon. On such a gloomy, rain soaked day, the bright photo mural of crashing waves on a golden, palm tree dotted beach looked like an oasis of warmth and cheer. The girls got out of the RSX and slouched to the door of the tanning salon. They were wearing matching, pink, see-through raincoats and had sporty backpacks slung over their shoulders. They were both sipping on 7-11 Big Gulps, though Ashley was drinking Diet Coke, while Ashlyn favored Diet Sprite.

As Ashley pushed open the door, an obnoxious, electronic bell sounded, *beeee-bong, beeee-bong*. There was no one at the front desk, which had lengths of bamboo nailed to it and a fake palm frond thatched roof, to suggest some kind of beach side shack. A fire door

at the end of a narrow corridor beside the mural was propped open with a soda can, and a wet wind and a flurry of angry Russian blew in from the back alley. Ashley looked at Ashlyn and rolled her eyes. "Not again," she said.

"Do you doubt?" Ashlyn asked, eyebrows raised.

"EV-ery time we come here," Ashley said. "It's the same old, same old."

She rang the bell on the counter. After a second, Yuri Yershov, the tanning salon manager, popped his close-shaved, sad-eyed head in the door and looked around. A cigarette dangled from his downturned mouth. He was pasty pale, a running joke between the girls. How could you work in a tanning salon and be so white? He had a cellphone pressed against his ear and, even from the counter, Ashley and Ashlyn could hear a shrill woman's voice screeching in Russian.

Yuri waved at the girls and shrugged apologetically. He held up a finger. "One minute, okay?" he mouthed, then turned his head and spoke into the phone. "Tanyosha, détká, I have to go. Nyet... no I am not blowing you. I'm at work. We can talk about this later."

Ashley and Ashlyn giggled at the incorrect phrase, "I am not blowing you."

"It's off, Yuri," Ashley said in a fake stage whisper. "Blowing you off."

He waved his hand to shush Ashley, uttered another string of Russian and snapped his phone shut, ducking into the store and brushing the water from his bristly head.

"Sorry sorry," he said. "Cellphone signal is shit in here. I think the tanning beds do it. I think they mess up the signal. I must go outside."

"Why don't you use that phone?" Ashlyn suggested helpfully, pointing to the salon's hard line that sat on the counter, surrounded by fliers and tropical drink umbrellas.

"I would, but..." He pointed to his cellphone like it was a malicious living thing. "Tanya, my girlfriend, she thinks I am cheating every minute. She is always checking up on me and then she wants to ask a

million questions. The boss gives me shit for the phone bills if I use his hard line."

As if it had heard him, the cellphone rang. He checked the caller ID and cringed. "Myrma," he muttered. "I told her..."

"It's okay," Ashley said, waving him toward the door. "Just take it. Go on out. We know the drill. We can take care of ourselves."

Yuri frowned, considering, then nodded. "Okay, thanks," he said, giving them a grateful thumbs up. He hurried toward the back door, flipping open his phone.

"Tanya?" he said. "I told you..."

He broke into agitated Russian and then paused, looking back toward the girls. "Hey, no drinks in the room this time, okay?" he told them.

"Sure," Ashlyn replied, and she and Ashley nodded and obediently dropped their half-full Big Gulps into the trashcan. "What ever you say, sweetheart."

"No, no, no," Yuri was saying into the cellphone. "Tanyosha, baby, she's just a client, I swear to you..."

When he reached the back door, Yuri realized that he had left his impromptu doorstop back on the counter, but going back to the counter would mean he would lose his signal. He looked around desperately. Next to the door was a cardboard box full of tubes of tanning lotion. He grabbed a tube, stepped outside, set it between the door and the jam, and let the door swing to. Satisfied that the fat tube would keep the door from closing, he returned his attention to his phone. Over his head, thunder cracked and the rain began to fall a little harder.

As soon as he was out of the door, Ashley retrieved her Big Gulp from the trash, sticking her tongue out in the direction of the back door. Together, she and Ashlyn crossed to a glass canister that was full of rubber tanning goggles floating in a blue liquid. The sign over the canister read "Sterilized Goggles—Caution. Alcohol is Flammable."

"Every time we come here," Ashley said as she picked a pair of goggles out of the alcohol.

"I know," Ashlyn said, selecting a pair for herself. "That girl must be the best lay in the world."

Ashley turned on her, frowning archly. "What? Lyn, what are you saying?" She made a dismissive noise. "Third best. Tops."

Ashlyn laughed and raised her hand for a high five. "No doubt," she crowed. "First and second are already taken."

The girls slapped hands, bumped hips, and then turned to the towels on a long, wall-mounted towel rack to wipe the goggles dry. Ashley turned to the hall that led to the tanning rooms, but Ashlyn looked at the front door and paused.

"Hold on a sec, okay?" she said.

She crossed to the desk and picked up a flier and a sharpie.

"What are you doing?" Ashley asked.

Ashlyn scrawled on the back of the flier, then found some tape. "No one's walking in and seeing me naked," she said.

"Not for free anyway," Ashley replied, and both girls giggled.

Ashlyn put tape on top of the flier and slapped it on the front door, then turned the deadbolt, locking it.

The note read: "Back in thirty minutes." She turned to Ashley.

"Yuri can take it down when he comes back," she said.

Ashley nodded. "Good plan." She stretched, cat like, up on her tiptoes. "I was thinking of doing twenty minutes in the Müller," she said. "We did that for the funerals and it turned out totally amazing."

Ashlyn frowned, unsure. "That was only a week ago, though," she said. "We're still pretty bronzed. Maybe only, like, a ten minute touch up? I don't want to wind up with some sort of gross cancer or anything."

Ashley nodded, considering this very seriously. "Maybe so," she replied. "I just want to make sure we totally look our best, you know, as a tribute to all those kids who died that night, and..." She swallowed, suddenly overcome with emotion. "And who will never get a graduation."

Ashlyn bit her lip, holding back tears of her own.

"Yeah," she said. "We, like, owe it to them, totally."

They touched fists and put their hands over their hearts.

"Come on," Ashley said as she threw her pack over her shoulder and turned toward the hallway that led to the tanning rooms. "Let's get to it."

Ashlyn fell in step and they walked bravely down the hall.

"Straight up," she said.

At the back door, unnoticed by the girls or Yuri, the cap of the tube of sun tan lotion popped open under the steady pressure of the emergency door, and tanning cream began to slowly ooze from the tube.

# NINE

Steam boiled around the peach, marble and cream tile of the bathroom that Wendy and Julie shared as Wendy pushed the door open. The sound of the shower hissed softly, underscored by singing, a slow, melancholy tune Wendy didn't recognize. The outline of her sister's body, elbows up and twisting at the waist as she shampooed her hair, was barely visible through the steamed up glass door of the shower stall.

Julie, always the social butterfly, was probably getting ready to go see some of her older friends graduate that night. Wendy, on the other hand, would not be attending. She had other things to take care of, like packing, and deciding what she would need to take with her for that intensive Greek and Latin language program she had signed up for at summer school. Of course, she would not be leaving for more than a week, but there was no point leaving everything until the last minute.

As she stood there, struggling to stay focused on the safe, simple and comforting task of organizing and planning what to bring, Wendy found her mind obsessively picking at the pointless conversation she'd had with Kevin and the other survivors. What was he trying to prove with that ridiculous urban legend bullshit? Going back to school had been a mistake. It had taken a lot out of her and she had little to spare. It took every drop of energy she had to keep the wolves of grief at bay.

Wendy stepped up to the sink countertop, cluttered as usual with Julie's make-up, skin creams and hair care products; her combs and brushes and blow driers; curling irons, nail files, tooth paste, rings, necklaces and earrings. The mess was a source of constant bickering between the sisters. Wendy was meticulously neat and organized. Julie was not. As an attempt to keep the peace, her father had remodeled the countertop so the sink was in the center with two distinctly separate areas, one on each side, complete with their own drawers. Julie was given the right side for her things, and Wendy the

left. This was fine at first, but Julie's mess was constantly creeping over onto Wendy's side.

Lipstick printed tissue and cotton swabs black from touching up liquid eyeliner made their insidious way across the divide into Wendy's territory, and Wendy's expensive whitening mouthwash or brand new tweezers would migrate back into the chaos of Julie's side. Standing there now, looking at the scattered disaster of Julie's things, Wendy felt a strange wave of melancholy love for her little sister, underscored by a needling anxiety. Julie was already a wild child and she was only a junior. What would happen next year when she was a senior and Wendy was not around to keep an eye on her?

Wendy opened the bottom drawer on her own side and removed her travel case, unzipping it and checking to be sure everything was full and ready to go. Once she arrived and settled into the dorm, she would buy full-sized bottles of everything she needed, but she wanted to make sure she would be covered those first few nights, in case a trip to the store was not practical until later in the week.

Shampoo and conditioner were both fine, but the bottle that held her body lotion was a little low. She refilled it carefully, wiping the neck with a tissue before screwing the color-coded cap back on. Toothpaste, dental floss, mouthwash and toothbrush were all good to go. Folding travel hairbrush, sewing kit and a sample sized bottle of a new perfume, a fresh, citrus scent that was not too heavy and would be perfect for the summer. After a moment's consideration, she added a small packet of cold-water detergent and a stain removing stick, in case she needed to hand wash some clothes.

She paused for a moment, holding the stain stick and looking at herself in the mirror. How utterly ludicrous of her to be worried about being able to stop an accidental chocolate stain from setting in to her skirt when she hadn't even been able to stop the ride that killed Jason.

She bit her lip until she tasted blood, eyes narrowed to slits against the threat of tears. She let out a long, shaky breath, then put the stain stick in her bag and removed her little first aid kit. She inventoried its neatly compartmentalized contents until she was able to breathe normally again. The kit was low on adhesive bandages, so she added

a few more of various sizes, and checked the date on the little tube of antibiotic ointment. It was still good for another three months, but if she did not use it up soon, she probably ought to replace it. First aid kit set and ready, she gave the whole travel bag one more going over. She had her tweezers and face cream and a few emery boards, but her nail clippers were nowhere to be found.

Unsurprisingly, Wendy spotted the nail clippers on Julie's side, half buried in a nest of cheap jewelry. She picked up the clippers, and a whole snarl of tangled beads and chains came with them, glittery earrings and bangles tumbling to the floor and into her unzipped travel bag.

Sighing, Wendy scooped up the fallen items, and then began fishing things out of her bag. She found a necklace of pink ceramic cherries, a dangling, beaded earring, a silver heart that had "Lover" on one side and "Fighter" on the other, and a pink plastic cuff with black rubber spikes.

The water turned off and the shower door scraped open. Julie looked out at her, her hair streaming with water as she groped for a towel.

"Hey there," Wendy said.

"Hey, sis," Julie replied. "You planning on stealing my jewels to finance your tuition at Yale?"

"I couldn't pay for a mail order degree in dog grooming with this junk," Wendy said, holding up a gaudy plastic flower ring like something a kid might get out of a gumball machine.

Julie chuckled, wrapping the towel around her head and stepping up to the mirror, unmindful of her nudity, but still crossing her arms self-consciously. She did this habitually, not to cover her budding breasts, but to cover the thick white caterpillar of scar that bisected her sternum. Julie hated that scar. Left behind long ago, when doctors had sliced her wide and cracked open her pliable infant ribs in a desperate race to rescue her failing heart, the scar was like a brand, marking her as unfit and unwell. A physical reminder of the hidden defect that stood between her and the normal teenage life she craved. Wendy felt that pang of anxiety again. How could she leave Julie behind?

"You're just jealous of my unique, ultra cool, shabby-chic sense of style," Julie said, utterly unaware of her sister's worry. "You wouldn't know cool if it jumped up and bit you."

Wendy shook her head and tried on a smile. It worked out okay, but didn't last. Sighing, she left the bathroom, tucking her bag under her arm and heading back to her room.

In her bedroom, Wendy put the travel bag into the inner pocket of her open suitcase and then turned to the closet, surveying her clothes with an eye towards summer in New Haven, Connecticut. Before she had made any decisions, Julie stalked out of the bathroom, a second towel wrapped around her body and pulled up high to cover all but the very top of the hated scar.

"You really are trying to steal my stuff," she said. "Come on, give it back!"

Wendy turned, blinking and confused. "Huh?" She frowned. "What do you mean? Give what back?"

Julie marched to Wendy's suitcase, snatched up her make-up bag and unzipped it. She dug furiously through it until she found what she was looking for. She held up her prize, angry and triumphant. It was a silver art deco bracelet from the Twenties, beautiful and delicate.

"This," she said, shaking the bracelet so it jingled softly. "This is my good luck bracelet. Mine. Grandma left it to me in her fucking will. If you think you're taking it off to Connecticut with you, you're out of your fucking mind."

Wendy blinked at the bracelet. "I'm sorry, Julie," she said. "I totally didn't realize it was in there. I... well... I guess I'm a little distracted."

"Well, I guess so," said Julie, unwilling to let go of her anger so quickly. "I guess I better check all your bags before you go, just to make sure you don't distract away any more of my stuff."

She turned on her heel, storming back to the bathroom, bracelet in hand.

Wendy slumped, suddenly feeling a hundred years old. "Julie," she called.

Julie stopped, impatient, then spun around. "What?"

"You were right, " Wendy said softly.

Julie snorted. "Of course I was right," she said. "It's my bracelet. Grandma gave it to me, not you."

Wendy shook her head. "I know that," she said. "That's not what I'm talking about. I mean, I need... I could use some help."

Caught off guard, Julie's face softened. She came forward and sat on the bed. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Is it the crash?"

Wendy nodded. "I just have such guilt over Jason. I..." She paused and then sat down beside Julie, hands open and helpless. "I should never have let that ride go. I'm usually such a control freak." She shook her head ruefully. "Jason and I had a fight about it actually, right before we got on the ride. I didn't do enough to stop it from happening. I should have done, I don't know, anything, something, whatever I could to stop it. I'd do anything to have a second chance. To go back and change it." She felt the tears again, pressing on the inside of her eyes, fighting to escape, but she held them back. "But I can't, can I? I can't."

Julie looked away, but her hand reached out and touched Wendy's arm.

"It's the worst feeling in the world," continued Wendy. "Wanting to take something back, or change something you can't change. I... I just don't want to feel like that about you someday."

Julie looked back up and then away, suddenly cagey. "What do you mean? I didn't go on any rides."

Wendy patted her hand. "That's not what I meant..." She sighed. "I'm sorry, I don't know what I'm saying. I'm just so confused." She looked down into Julie's eyes. "When I get settled, can you come and visit me for a while? I think... when I finally get away from this town I'll be ready to work out all this stuff I'm feeling. I know you and I never really talk, and I want to change that. It's like I still think of you as a baby who might eat poison or put her finger in the electric socket the second I turn my back. I'm sorry for that, and I want to find a way for us to be more like equals."

Julie squeezed Wendy's hand. "I'll come," she said. "You know I will."

"Yeah?" She looked at Julie, raising an eyebrow shyly. "And we can put this teenage sister bullshit behind us?"

"Totally," Julie said. She looked down at the art deco bracelet she held in her hand. "Here," she said as she put the bracelet down on Wendy's desk. "You need some luck right about now, way more than me. You keep it for a while. I'll get it back when I come to see you."

Wendy smiled, touched, and nodded. "Thanks, Julie," she said. "I can use all the help I can get, I guess."

Suddenly Julie sat up, shaking off the unexpectedly sentimental mood. "Oh, hey," she said. "Since we're swapping stuff, I just remembered I wanted to ask you—can I use the yearbook camera to take some snaps at graduation tonight? Perry's brother said he's going to pull some big prank and I want to see if I can catch it on camera."

"Sure," said Wendy, as she stood up and crossed to her desk. "As long as you take it back to Mr Smith tomorrow."

"Sure," Julie said, standing. "No problem, sis."

Wendy took the camera out of her desk drawer and held it out to Julie, then hesitated and pulled it back, brows knitted and her lip between her teeth.

"You know what," she said. "All the pics from..." She paused and frowned. "From that night are on there. Give me a minute and I'll dump them so you'll have an empty disk. I'll have it for you when you're ready to go."

Julie grimaced in sympathy. "Oh wow, right," she said. "Okay, I'll go get ready and come back just before I go. And hey, one more thing."

"What?"

Julie shot her a lopsided grin. "Thanks for not telling mom I was at Red River."

Wendy returned her sister's smile. "S'okay," she said.

Julie turned and went back into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Wendy looked down at the camera. Suddenly it felt as dangerous as a gun in her hand. She fought the urge to drop it in the trash, the way she had dumped all the stuff from her locker. Instead she turned

it on and sat down at her desk. She shivered as if a cold breeze had passed over her. Her Joey Ramone bobble head, a gag gift from Julie that she'd never had the heart to throw away, nodded vigorously, though she was sure she hadn't bumped the desk. She looked at her window. Was it open? No. It was closed. She shrugged and fished around behind her computer for the fire-wire connection that allowed her to operate the camera from the computer and save the pictures to her hard drive. She plugged the cable into the camera and the camera into the charger, and then turned on her computer.

Once it booted up, Wendy double clicked the camera icon on the desktop and a window opened, showing thumbnails of all the pictures in the camera's memory. She selected them all and dragged them to the trash, but before she let go of the mouse button, she hesitated. The pictures of Jason's last few minutes on earth were there. Did she really want to throw them away? Didn't she want to at least have one last look at Jason's face before the pictures were gone forever, sent to digital heaven? Part of her wanted to throw them away, to erase them and all the messy, chaotic and dangerous emotions associated with them, but a part of her longed to see Jason's face again, no matter how much it hurt. That part won.

Wendy dragged the thumbnails back to the camera window and double-clicked on a picture with Jason in it. It opened. Wendy bit down hard on the soft meat of her lower lip, regretting allowing herself to look at the picture, but unable to look away. It was the picture of Jason standing with his arm around the fiberglass devil. He was grinning and giving a thumbs up. He looked so vibrant and alive, so friendly and warm that it felt as if she had been kicked in the stomach. She moved the mouse to close the picture, thinking that she just couldn't handle this right now, and that she ought to go back to the calm, finite and sensible task of packing. Then something in the background of the shot made her pause. She leaned closer.

From the angle that the picture was taken, the looping track of Devil's Flight seemed to go right through Jason's head, and at the moment she had snapped it, the train appeared to be about to smash into his temple. Considering how he had died, it was a gruesome and unfortunate joke. She shrugged and wrapped her arms around her

body. It was only a coincidence. Just like her vision had been. Enough of this morbid nonsense, she thought, and selected all the thumbnails again.

As she made to drag them to the trash, Wendy paused once again. Another of the thumbnails had caught her eye. It was the sixth or seventh shot she had taken that night, the one where she had tried to catch Jason and Kevin on the High Dive, but which had been ruined when the ride had dropped just as she pressed the button.

She double clicked on it. The picture opened and she felt a thin wire of nausea coiling in her throat. It was very dark, and the bottom of the picture was a bunch of blurry streaks: the gondola dropping out of frame. The High Dive sign, glowing brightly in front of the night sky, took up most of the picture. Except it didn't say High Dive. The "V" was unlit. It said: "HIGH DI E." Wendy tried to shake off the chilly dread that gripped her, but it wouldn't go. Was every picture some sort of grisly joke? One spooky picture was a coincidence. Two was unnerving. She was afraid to look at the other pictures, but she couldn't resist.

Holding her breath with trepidation, she selected all the thumbnails and double-clicked on them. They flashed open in quick succession, layering on top of each other until they were all open. The picture on top was the photo Kevin had taken up Stacey Kobayashi's skirt. Wendy leaned in, the lewdness of the picture not even registering as she searched the frame, looking for clues. Most of the picture was taken up by Stacey's legs, ass and skirt, with the vast white triangle formed by the crotch of her skimpy thong right in the center, but a quarter of the frame was background, looking up at the ceiling. There was someone walking by under the ceiling fans of the covered dining area where Kevin, Jason, Wendy and Carrie had been sitting. The shot was so skewed that it was hard to tell who it was, but then she noticed a glint of light off that silver, mud-flap girl medallion and realized it was Frank Cheek. Frank had got off the coaster before the crash had happened, and Stacey hadn't ridden it at all, so there was obviously nothing of real significance in that photo.

The next photo was of Lewis at the ring-the-bell game, caught, head down below his shoulders, at the end of his swing, with the

weight rising up the rail behind him. Lewis too had survived, so there couldn't be anything there either. She clicked the photo closed. The one below it was another one of Frank, looking scared and off balance on the Whacky Ladder. She clicked past it quickly. The next one was Erin and Ian at the shooting gallery. Like typical rebellious outsiders, they hadn't wanted their picture in the yearbook and had held up their hands in front of their faces, their black nails out of focus in the foreground. Erin held the air rifle in her other hand. Ian was behind her, standing under a row of pointed tan banners.

Wendy shrugged. Her eerie theory was rapidly falling apart. Most of the pictures seemed to be of the survivors. She hadn't any pictures of the kids who had died—except Jason of course. She started to click through the pictures faster, not bothering now to examine them in detail, just confirming that there were no more photos of Jason. She was wrong. There was one more, another shot that Kevin had taken, one of the first on the disk. This photo was totally mundane, nothing scary or weird about it. She and Jason stood side by side, smiling against a dark background. His arm was around her and she looked happy and untroubled. There was nothing in it to creep her out, but it still hurt to look at. She clicked it away.

Beneath was the picture of Julie giving her the double bird, and beneath that, she came upon the picture of Ashley and Ashlyn, surrounded by drooling boys at the clown shoot. She was about to close that one too, but at that moment her desk lamp flickered, and the impossible wind she had felt before returned. She looked at the lamp. It was fine now, but the chill from the wind remained. She looked at her window. Still closed. She frowned and returned her attention to her monitor, moving the mouse to close the picture of the two blonde girls, but something made her pause.

She looked at the photo again. There was nothing obvious about it that should have made her uneasy. No roller coaster racing toward their heads, but something in their expressions was odd. They were laughing, mouths wide, but it almost looked like they were screaming, and the red glare from the One Eighty ride's flashing police light washed them with a fiery orange glow. They almost looked like they were covered in flames and writhing in agony.

Wendy chewed her lip, thoughtful. The girls had gotten off the ride. In fact, they had been the first to leave. They were survivors, just like she was. The photo couldn't be predicting their deaths, because they weren't dead. She shook her head and again made to close the photo, but then the stupid story Kevin had told her that afternoon came back to her—that lame, urban legend bullshit about the plane, and the kid who had a vision and got off with his friends before it crashed, and how they had all died horribly over the next few months. She snorted. Like Death was some kind of accountant, who had to kill the ones he missed to keep the books straight. It was a dumb story, but if there was even the tiniest grain of truth to it, then maybe the pictures did predict the deaths of their subjects—the deaths that were yet to come.

She looked again at the photo of Ashley and Ashlyn. Was it really likely the girls were going to die by being burned to death? Murdered by a psychopathic pin-up photographer, maybe, but not burned to death. Then she remembered her conversation with them that afternoon. They had invited her to the tanning salon to tan with them. It was hard to imagine a fire starting in a place like that, but maybe they were going to be tanned to death. The red of their skin might be a terrible sunburn. That sounded so silly that she almost laughed, but why was her hair rising on the back of her neck, and why did she have a sick, knotted feeling in her stomach?

Wendy remembered that Ashlyn had given her a cellphone number when they had invited her. She looked around her desk. Where had she put it? Now she remembered. She had thrown it away, of course. She was getting ready to leave for Yale. She had no reason to call the high school bimbos. She grabbed the wastebasket beside her desk, put it between her knees, and started digging through it. There it was, all scrunched up beneath last month's issue of *The New Yorker*.

She grabbed it and pulled it out, uncrumpling it and smoothing it down on her desk. She picked up her phone and looked at the note.

Behind her, the door opened.

"Hey, Wendy. Camera ready?"

Wendy looked up. Julie was standing in the door, dressed in a slim gray dress and black pumps, looking very chic, except for the large, fruity wad of gum she was chewing like a cud.

"Um, just a minute," said Wendy. "I got, uh, kinda caught up, looking at them. I'll dump 'em off in a sec, okay?"

"Perry and Amber are going to be here any second," Julie whined.

"I know. I know, but..." She held up the phone. "I... I just need a minute, you know, like, in private."

Julie pouted, but then shrugged and backed out the door. "Whatever," she said. "But hurry up, okay?"

She closed the door a little harder than was necessary.

Wendy looked at Ashlyn's note again and dialed the number. It rang once, twice, three times, then...

"Hello?" said Ashlyn.

Wendy breathed a sigh of relief. She was amazed how nervous she had become over such a silly theory.

"Ashlyn, this is Wendy," she said into the telephone. "Have you guys gone to the tanning..."

There was a girlish laugh on the other end of the phone.

"Psych!" Ashlyn's voice said. "Leave a message. Ha ha!"

Wendy's face tightened with worry and frustration. Maybe her theory wasn't so silly after all. Why wasn't Ashlyn answering her phone? She always had it on her. She had even been talking on it in line for the roller coaster. It was as much a part of her as her spleen. The message tone beeped.

"Hi, Ashlyn, it's Wendy. I was hoping to catch you guys before you went to the tanning salon, but I guess I missed you. Uh, give me a call when you're done, and thanks for the invite."

She moved to put the handset back on the cradle, but then paused and brought it back to her ear.

"Um, sorry I was too late," she said.

Still uneasy, she hung up the phone. Just as it touched the cradle, her desk lamp flickered again. and the bulb exploded with a loud pop. Wendy jumped. The room was plunged into rainy afternoon shadow. Wendy stared at the lamp. Her face was bathed in the orange glow of her monitor, which still showed the picture of Ashley

and Ashlyn, their skin a bright, lurid devil red. Thunder rumbled overhead.

# TEN

Thunder rolled overhead as Ashley shouldered into the tanning room and flicked on the lights. Ashlyn pushed in behind her and the girls crossed to a low bench next to a wooden coat rack with a circular top. The room was long and narrow, lit by soft, amber wall sconces. It was decorated in a tropical style to match the lobby. Another photomural of a serene island beach covered the entire back wall, while the other three were paneled in strips of bamboo. A plastic palm tree, gracefully curved by "trade winds," stood in the corner opposite the coat rack.

The tropical mood was somewhat marred by a metal air conditioning duct that poked out of the ceiling, and by the tanning beds themselves, huge, seven foot long, three foot wide, chrome and steel pods that lay along the left and right walls with about three feet between them. Their interiors glowed an eerie, unnatural blue. They looked like they belonged in a science fiction film rather than a beach party movie.

The girls began stripping off their raincoats and backpacks. Ashley dropped her stuff on the bench and crossed to the beds, slurping on her Big Gulp. On top of the light tubes of both beds were plastic placards that read: "This bed has been cleaned and is ready for tanning. Are you?" She removed them both and put them on a table by the door.

"Come on, Lee," said Ashlyn as she hung her raincoat and backpack on the coat rack. "Yuri said no drinks. What if you spill it like last time? He'll make us clean that shit up."

The weight of the backpack was too much for the coat rack. It started to tip over. Ashlyn caught it and took the backpack off. She set it on one of the rack's legs to steady it.

Ashley glared at Ashlyn and took a long, defiant fuck you slurp on her straw, before holding it up and shaking it to show her that there was nothing but ice left.

"Happy, bee-yotch?" she asked. "Nothing to spill."

She put the empty cup on the table between the tanning beds and crossed to the wall-mounted control panel that operated the beds.

Ashlyn sneered and dropped into a mock kung fu pose.

"Except your blood," she snarled. "Watch it or I'll go all *Kill Bill* on your ass."

The girls laughed. Below the table with the empty cup was a gray electrical box—the buck booster, which monitored and increased the electrical output for the beds. Thick electrical cables led into it from the socket in the wall, and out of it to the beds. An LCD display on the buck booster read: 230 VAC. A yellow and black warning label next to the display read: "Warning—This device should never be set above 250 VAC."

Ashley leaned in to the control panel on the wall. She set the timer to fifteen minutes.

Behind her, Ashlyn moved to the electronic thermostat. "Yuri keeps the rooms too cold," she said.

"Maybe it's supposed to be colder for the machines, or whatever," Ashley replied.

"Maybe it's because Yuri is from fucking Siberia and he wants to feel at home," Ashlyn countered, shrugging as she tapped a button on the thermostat's LCD display, setting the room temperature to seventy-three degrees. "What's a couple of degrees gonna do, right?"

Ashley pulled off her shirt and then unhooked her bra, revealing the body and the breasts that every teenaged boy in a fifty-mile radius—and truth be told, a fair number of older men as well—had fantasized about ever since the girls had hit puberty. As all those sweaty minds had suspected, her body was flawless, her breasts plump and perfectly shaped.

Ashlyn rummaged through her backpack, and slumped her shoulders.

"Oh shit," she groaned. "I forgot my iPod. I can't believe this."

Ashley laughed and tossed her hair, pulling out her own iPod. "Ha ha," she said. "Sucks to you, bitch."

She pointed to a three-foot shelf mounted over the other tanning bed that held a half dozen dusty jewel boxes.

"Looks like they have some CDs at least," Ashley said. "It's that or the sound of the tanning bed fans."

Ashlyn sighed, as if it was almost too much to bear, then stood and shuffled over to the shelf. She stood on tiptoes to look through the meager selection, holding on to the shelf with one hand for balance.

"Celine Dion? Britney Spears? Kenny G? Huey Lewis?" She rolled her eyes in disgust. "Jeez, are we, like, the only cool people who come here, or what?"

She reached for the last CD on the shelf, putting weight on her steadying hand. The shelf dropped a quarter inch as the anchor screws, drilled through the metal L braces that supported the shelf, were pulled a little way out of the dry wall. Ashlyn looked at the last CD, scowling skeptically at the psychedelic colors of the cover.

"Have a Nice Decade," she read. "Greatest Hits of the Seventies." She shrugged. "Better than that other shit, I guess."

"Come on, admit it, Lyn," Ashley said. "You really are a closet Huey fan."

"Yeah, right."

She put the CD case in the hand that rested against the shelf and opened it with her free hand. Once again, the screws in the L braces pulled out a little from the wall. Ashlyn didn't notice. She stuck her finger through the hole of the CD and threw the jewel box back on the shelf as Ashley fired up the tanning beds. The tubes began to glow more brightly. The fan motors started whirring.

Ashlyn popped the disk into a wall-mounted CD Walkman, then pulled off her T-shirt too. Her tits were a little smaller, and her body was not quite as lean and ripped as Ashley's, who had been working out with her fitness freak parents since before she was born, but so far Ashlyn had no complaints. Besides, together they were devastating, far more than the sum of their parts.

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Outside, Yuri continued the endlessly spiralling argument with his girlfriend. The irony of this whole, mad business was that Tanya was the only woman in his life to whom he had ever been completely

faithful, yet she was insanely jealous, utterly convinced that he had a line of women around the block the moment her back was turned. At first, it was almost flattering that she thought he was so desirable that women could not possibly resist him, when in truth, it was she who could have any lover she chose. Tanya was without a doubt the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on. She was tall and regal with fierce Mongol cheekbones and a body that took no prisoners, but at this point she was starting to become far more trouble than she was worth. Yuri's closest drinking buddy, a sardonic American named Spence, had once said that no matter how hot a chick might look, somebody, somewhere was sick of putting up with her shit. At the time, Yuri thought that was ridiculous, but now, buffeted by Tanya's non-stop interrogation, he was starting to understand the wisdom in that simple statement. Still, he knew he would not break it off with Tanya. How could he? When he got home, he knew that her jealous rage would transform into a kind of wild passion that would leave him raw, exhausted and totally happy. This was just the price he paid for that kind of happiness.

"Détka," he said again. "Baby, you know you are the only one..."

Behind him the tanning cream was still oozing out of the tube and spilling into an oily puddle below the door. A lot of cream had squeezed out of the tube, which was getting so thin that the door was edging closed.

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In the tanning room, Ashley sat on the edge of the tanning bed, wearing nothing but a miniscule black thong. She pulled the goggles on, adjusted them, and placed the headphones of her iPod over her ears. Ashlyn, already lying on her bed and wearing absolutely nothing at all, looked up at her quizzically. She lifted her head and pulled aside one of the earphones of the built-in CD player.

"Lee," she said. "You're wearing underwear?"

Ashley nodded as she lay down and made herself comfortable.

"Steinmetz says he gets off on tan lines," she replied.

Ashlyn curled her lip. "Steinmetz is a freak."

"Yeah," said Ashley. "But he's a rich freak. Anyway you're just jealous."

Ashlyn was really less than thrilled about Ashley's dawdling with that creepy guy. For one thing, he was so old, like almost thirty. And yeah, maybe he had lots of money and all, but he was into weird stuff, like having Ashley step on him with her shoes on, and smelling her feet after she'd been on the treadmill. He had bought her over fifty pairs of shoes. Most of all, he was the first guy that Ashley had played around with more than once. She spent way too much time with him. Ashlyn didn't want some scuzzy weirdo from the gym spending more time with Lee than she did. She shrugged. Maybe she was jealous, not of her but of him.

"Look," Ashley said, seeming to sense Ashlyn's discomfort. "Tell you what. Next time I go over to his place, why don't you come with? We wear the same size shoes. I think he would cream his jeans if we both stood on him at the same time."

"But that's so weird," Ashlyn said. "Standing on a guy. I just don't see how that's even remotely sexy."

"It's so hot," Ashley said. "You'll love it. It's like being Girlzilla, stomping down the city. It's a total power trip, grinding your heels into a man's naked chest."

"If you say so," Ashlyn said, still skeptical. She pictured herself standing on her current fuck du jour, a rough and tumble BMX ramp rat named Snake. Nah. It just didn't seem right. She preferred her boys to be more of the take charge, caveman, drag her around by the hair and make her like it type. Ashley and Ashlyn had always been in such perfect agreement about everything that Ashlyn couldn't help but resent Steinmetz even more for filling Ashley's head with weird ideas. It was disturbing to think maybe she and Ashley might actually be starting to grow apart.

Ashley reached up and closed the lid of her tanning bed, bringing the brightly glowing tubes down to within inches of her face and ending the conversation. Ashlyn sighed and did the same. No point getting into it now. Ashley would get tired of this guy soon enough, just like she always did, and then things would be back to normal.

On the table between the two beds, the Big Gulp full of ice was covered in beads of condensation, pooling at the base and forming a little puddle. As another bead of water ran down the cup and into the puddle, the puddle broke its meniscus and a tiny arm of water slowly began to find its way across the table toward the back edge.

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Outside, Yuri was distractedly kicking the cinderblock wall of the back alley while continuing his cellphone conversation with Tanya. She was finally starting to wind down, to accept that maybe he really was just working and not actually playing around with some other woman. Didn't she realize that she was such a non-stop handful that Yuri couldn't possibly have any energy left over to cheat, even if he wanted to? Not to mention the fact that he was forty-one years old. The very idea of trying to coax even a single extra drop out of his poor, overworked yáytsa, on top her voracious nightly marathons was ridiculous in the extreme. Besides, in spite of everything, he did love her. As crazy as she made him, as much as he wanted to tell her to piss off and hang up on her, he still in his heart wanted nothing more than to make her happy. If need be, he would get down on his knees on the rain-slick pavement, then and there, and swear that she was the only woman in the world for him. Anything.

Behind him, unnoticed, the tube of tanning lotion, now utterly flat, squeezed out of the gap between the door and the frame like a watermelon seed pinched between a finger and thumb, and dropped down to bob and spin in the puddle below the door.

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In her tanning bed, Ashlyn, naked except for her goggles, started to groove as the opening scream of the Ohio Players' "Love Roller Coaster" plummeted into the song's funky bass line. She frowned slightly as the verse started.

"Huh? I thought this was a Red Hot Chili Peppers song," Ashlyn murmured to herself. She shrugged. "Must be a cover."

In the other bed, Ashley nodded her head to a harder beat. Her fingers tapped the tubes at her sides. The girls were both lost in their own little worlds.

On the table, the trickle of water reached the edge of the table, where it pooled for a moment. Then it slid down the side. A few drops dripped down onto the gray buck booster box, and found a seam in the metal. The box buzzed. A few tiny, white sparks flew, spraying the underside of the table.

As the tubes of the tanning beds heated up, their fans kicked in, blowing the hot air out through grills at their heads. The room started to heat up. The LCD of the thermostat, which had already climbed to the seventy-three degrees Ashlyn had set it at, now began to climb higher—seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six. To compensate, the thermostat turned the air conditioning on, and the air duct that stuck down out of the ceiling began to blast cold air. The breeze blew against Ashley's coat, causing the coat rack on which it hung to sway.

More water ran down the side of the table with the Big Gulp on it and a stream of drops fell onto the buck booster, seeping into the seam. There was a loud bang and more sparks. The red LCD on the front of the gray box winked out for a second, and then flashed back on. The numbers started to go up—240 VAC, then 245 VAC.

The coat rack began to sway wider and wider, pushed by the blast of frigid air that hit the raincoat every time it swung back under the vent. Finally, it lost its balance and tipped over completely, falling against the plastic palm tree. The palm tree fell too, overbalanced by its heavy, drooping leaves, and crashed down behind Ashley's bed. The crown of plastic leaves clipped the wooden CD shelf on the way down and jerked it out of the wall. It fell, spilling jewel boxes to the floor, bounced off the leaves of the tree, and came to rest upside down on top of the lid of Ashley's tanning bed. The metal L braces that had held it to the wall stuck straight up in the air.

The LCD of the buck booster continued to climb—255 VAC... 260 VAC... 270... 280...

Ashley, bobbing to the music on her iPod, did not notice the thud above her, or the increasing speed of the fan beneath her, as the bed's

cooling system fought to control the rising temperature.

In the other bed, Ashlyn, still grooving to "Love Roller Coaster," didn't hear the fans either. But beads of sweat started to form on her brow, her breasts and her arms. She opened her eyes and turned her head in the direction of the other bed, calling to Ashley.

"Way too warm in here now, huh?" she said.

No response, so Ashlyn raised her voice.

"Lee," she called. "You think it's a little warm in here now?"

Ashley popped one of her earpieces out. "Huh? What'ja say?"

"I said," Ashlyn repeated for the third time, "don't you think it's kinda warm now?"

"Yeah," said Ashley. "A little. Why don't..."

A cellphone rang, its insistent electronic warble cutting through the funky bass grind.

"Is that my phone or yours?" Ashlyn asked.

"That's yours," said Ashley. "Mine plays 'Linkin Park' now."

"Oh yeah, right," Ashlyn said.

"Gee," Ashley said, reaching up to open the lid of her bed. "I guess I fucked up and set it too warm."

"I'll go ahead and cool it off," Ashlyn said, and started to roll up on one side to open the bed. "I'm dying in here."

But as Ashley pushed up on her lid, the wooden CD shelf slid off the smooth top of the bed, twisting as it fell, and one of the L braces got caught in the metal rod handle of the bed. Inertia caused the trailing end of the shelf to flip up, and, just as Ashlyn began raising her lid, the other L brace slotted down through the rod handle of her bed. Ashlyn banged her head as the lid unexpectedly stopped moving.

Ashley pushed at her lid, but to no avail. The phone was still ringing, but it might as well have been a million miles away.

"What the fuck?" she said, a high note of anxiety creeping into her voice.

She shoved again, harder, and so did Ashlyn, but linked together by the wooden shelf and its metal braces, the lids of the tanning beds could be raised no further.

"What's going on?" Ashley called.

"I don't know," Ashlyn replied. "Do these things have locks or something?"

Between them, below the table, the buck booster continued to shoot sparks and its LCD continued to rise, faster now—300 VAC... 310... The tanning bed lights began to glow brighter and brighter, and burn hotter and hotter. Ashley and Ashlyn closed their eyes against the blinding light. Their hands were slick with sweat as they shoved and strained against the lids of their beds. But the more they pushed, the more tightly the shelf became wedged in the handles of the beds. Ashlyn's cellphone stopped ringing.

"Something's wrong," said Ashlyn, her voice rising with worry. "Lee, what are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything," said Ashley, panic beginning to grip her. "What are you doing?"

They were both sweating profusely now, perspiration gushing out of their pores. Their hair, perfect and glossy when they laid down, was now stringy and matted with sweat. Their make-up was running down their faces. Ashlyn had a sudden, awful fear that someone was going to have to come in and free them, and that they would see her looking all messed up and skanky, like the girl cat that fell into the barrel of water in that Pepe LePew cartoon.

"I can't fucking breathe!" Ashley screamed. She pushed with all her might against the lid. Her arms shook. The lid did not budge.

"It's too hot," Ashlyn said, frightened by the fear in her best friend's voice. She kicked and shoved at her lid as a deeper panic started to set in. "I'm burning up!"

The buck booster LCD ticked up to 335VAC, then 340.

The voltage was too much. The lamps over Ashley's face exploded, sending slivers of superheated glass into her face, like tiny knives. She twisted aside, screeching, and tried to cover her face with her arm, but the naked elements of the bulbs had burst into flames and her elbow blistered, skin searing and blackening. She jerked it away. Her hair caught on fire. She beat at the flames, but it was futile.

"Lyn!" she screamed. "Lyn! Help me!"

"Lee?" called Ashlyn, her skin a deep, glistening red from the heat. "What happened? I heard something pop. Are you okay?"

She tried to scoot down out of the foot of the bed, but the built-in fan that was meant to keep the occupant of the bed cool blocked the way. She tried to go up instead, but the head of the bed was set right against the back wall of the room. There was no way out. Suddenly, she started to jerk and scream, clawing at her face. The tanning goggles were melting. The plastic was bubbling and sinking into her skin.

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In the back alley, Yuri, still on the phone, looked up. The scream came again. He rolled his eyes.

"Stupid girls. What now?" He spoke into the phone. "No, no. Not you. Detka, I got to go. I'll call you later, okay?" He knew the trouble he would be in for, but snapped his phone shut anyway and hurried to the back door. He saw that the tube of tanning lotion had slipped out of the door jam. He grabbed the door handle anyway, but the door had locked. He sighed, and turned to jog down the alley and circle around to the front of the building.

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The girls' skin bubbled and blistered as they writhed in mirror image agony. They would have called to each other, would have proclaimed their undying love and loyalty to each other, would have forgiven each other for all the catty comments they had made to each other over the years, but they were beyond words now. All they could do was scream and struggle. Suddenly, all the bulbs in both beds began exploding like firecrackers, shooting off electrical shocks and billowing flames above and below the terrified girls. Their skin and hair burned merrily, and began to crackle and pop. Now they were beyond screaming.

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Yuri ran around the front of the mini-mall and down the storefronts. He grabbed the handle of the California Sun door and

pulled. It didn't open.

"What is this?" he cried.

He yanked the handle again, then spotted the flyer taped to the inside of the door.

"Back in thirty minutes," he read. "What is this bullshit? You are eighty-six you crazy bitches. What do you do to my salon?"

His head jerked up and he sniffed. He could smell smoke.

"Fuck!" He patted all his pockets, but his keys weren't there. He looked through the door to the front desk. His keys were lying on the counter, next to the phone, right where he had left them. "Goddamn it."

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Inside the tanning room, flames licked out of the two closed tanning beds. Ashley and Ashlyn were burning like torches, but their struggles had ceased. There was no more life in them than there was in two steaks on a grill. The plastic lids of the tanning beds began to melt and drip, and the beautiful tropical beach in the big photomural on the wall glowed with an orange light, not cast by the warm Californian sun.

# ELEVEN

Twin caskets waited beside twin graves dug into the beautifully tended lawn of Elysian Grove Memorial Park, as if the twin-ness that Ashley and Ashlyn had longed for in life had finally been achieved in death. At the head of the caskets, a dignified old minister read a eulogy.

"We may feel," he intoned, "that our lives are not our own. That death controls and frames our lives; that our births are nothing but death begun. That we are walking toward the grave the moment we step out of the womb."

Ashley's tan and beautiful parents stood on one side of the graves, huddled together with anguished faces, as if it was impossible for them to accept that all the vitamins, healthy diet and exercise, and everything else they did to beat back death, had been unable to save their only daughter. On the opposite side was Ashlyn's family: pale, haggard father with grim and shadowed eyes, and bland, sweet-faced stepmother in a baggy black skirt and matronly blouse, surrounded by a brace of small, somber girls, uncomfortable in brand. new, navy blue dresses and glossy black shoes.

Along the edges of the two graves stood the friends and fellow McKinley High students of the two popular girls. Among the genuinely bereaved and the crowds of horny boys who were bemoaning the fact that their walking wet dream had ceased to be, were the survivors of the crash—Kevin, Lewis, Ian and Erin. Julie, Perry and Amber were there too. Only two people with a connection to the crash were missing. Wendy and Frank Cheek. The assembled teens seemed more than saddened by the death of their classmates. There was a sense of fear and unease among them. The tragedy of the roller coaster crash had shocked and horrified them, but another gruesome accident coming so quickly on the heels of the first had taken the heart out of them. They looked haunted and defeated. Some stared dully ahead, like rabbits caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. Others shivered and glanced repeatedly over their shoulders as if sensing a hidden presence there.

Kevin stood slightly apart from the others, hands jammed in his pockets. He was dressed in his only suit. It was utilitarian gray and single breasted, a little too short in the sleeves and dangerously tight across his broad, muscular shoulders. He had worn the stupid suit more often since the accident than in the whole rest of the time he had owned it: too many funerals. Jason's funeral had been here in Elysian Grove too, though who knew what random collection of scraps was actually inside that ominously closed casket. What was left of Carrie had been cremated, and the ashes scattered along the river where she had loved to play when she was little. It had been a beautiful ceremony, but Kevin had left early because it was just too painful to feel the hatred, anger and hostility that was coming off Carrie's parents. They had never liked him, never felt that he was good enough for their precious baby girl, and now that she was gone, they seemed to resent him for still being alive.

"Yet whether it is the tragic loss of young lives," the minister continued, "of which we have suffered too much of late, or the soft passing of the elderly in the night, we are all equal in the eyes of death. We..."

Ian cocked his head, incredulous. "Equal?" he said, his voice loud in the respectful silence of the ceremony. "Equal in the eyes of death?"

The crowd tensed at this unexpected breach of decorum. Some gasped and stared. The minister frowned and faltered in his speech. Erin put her hand on Ian's arm, but he shook her off.

"All of us?" Ian shook his head. "How can you say that, you platitude prattling fraud? Think about it for a second why don't you?"

"Ian," said Erin, blushing fiercely behind her white powder make-up. "Come on. Don't make a scene, okay?"

He ignored her. "Charles Manson's made it to seventy," he continued. "Saddam's still kicking, terrorists and pimps and mean, old fart vice presidents have heart attack after heart attack and they're still walking around sucking up air."

Kevin gritted his teeth and started edging toward Ian. He made eye contact with Lewis, who nodded and started circling behind the

ranting Goth. It wasn't that Kevin disagreed with him, but this wasn't the place, or the time. The funeral wasn't for them, it was for Ashley and Ashlyn's families, and they didn't need their beautiful ceremony and quiet closure busted up by some angry fool with a philosophical axe to grind.

Ian kept going, as if he couldn't stop. His eyes were wild and frightened.

"All the atrocities they've committed, all the horror they've brought to millions of lives, and they're all alive and well. But these two girls, who never did shit to anyone, don't even make it to nineteen? Come on. Where's the fucking equality in that? You got an answer for that, preacher man?"

The minister coughed and hemmed, uncomfortable, as the teens looked to him, their eyes demanding an answer. Even the families, who had listened to the beginning of Ian's tirade aghast and offended, were now turning to the minister, looking for some kind of answer.

Kevin put a hand on Ian's shoulder. Lewis did the same on the other side.

"Come on, man," said Kevin. "Let 'em have their ceremony. We're all pissed about this, but come on. This just isn't cool. Let's take a walk."

"Yeah, yeah," said Ian, hanging his head. "Whatever. Let 'em eat their fake, fairy tale, happy ending bullshit with two fucking forks for all I care."

He let Kevin and Lewis lead him away through the gravestones and mausoleums, as the minister coughed and resumed his interrupted eulogy.

At the winding road where the cars of those attending the funeral were parked, Ian unlocked the door of his beige, 1986 Honda Civic wagon, while Kevin and Lewis looked on, and Erin waited at the passenger side door. The back panel and window of the car were covered with hundreds of band stickers, mostly weird, creepy names Kevin had never heard of, except for the familiar NIN logo that stood for Nine Inch Nails. Kevin wondered for a passing moment if Ian would be impressed to find out that Kevin liked Nine Inch Nails too,

or would he just sneer and say that of course the dumb jock would like the most obvious and commercial of all the bands.

"I'm sorry," Ian said suddenly. "I just couldn't listen to anymore of that sanctimonious, hypocritical bullshit. Sometimes..."

"I know, man," Kevin said, keeping his voice mild and unthreatening. "I think you got your point across. Just go home and forget about it, okay?"

"Whatever." Ian got in the car and reached across to open Erin's door. She gave Kevin an embarrassed smile, then ducked in and buckled up as Ian turned the key and the little car reluctantly coughed into life.

Kevin and Lewis stepped back and watched them drive off. Kevin let out a relieved breath and turned back toward the crowd of mourners around the twin caskets.

Lewis joined him, shaking his head. "That freak is completely fucked up," he said. "How does he come up with all that screwy shit?"

Kevin smirked. "Reading, dude," he said, mouth twisted with subtle sarcasm that he knew damn well Lewis would never catch. "It fucks you up. Gives you all kinds of weird ideas."

"No shit?" Lewis asked earnestly. "Man, I'm glad I never do that." He frowned. "Wait a second. What about them Cliff Notes we all used for Mrs Thurmill's class? Those are safe, right?"

Kevin had to suppress a laugh. "Lewis," he said, putting a hand on the big jock's massive shoulder. "I really don't think you need to worry."

Lewis nodded and smiled, obviously relieved. "Cool," he said.

Lewis sighed as they approached the edges of the continuing ceremony. "I hope this is over soon," Lewis said. "These things suck. Fucking dull as dirt, man, and I've been to, what, a fucking hundred of them lately? Shit, if you ever have to go to my funeral, bring me a PSP so I got something to do."

"I'll be sure to do that," Kevin said.

Kevin started tightening his face into the proper expression of sober sadness, when his cellphone vibrated in his pocket. He stopped and motioned Lewis ahead, then turned his back on the funeral and flipped his phone open.

"Hello?" he said.

"It's Wendy," said the voice on the line. "I'm with Jay."

Kevin frowned, momentarily shaken by that peculiar statement, then he raised his head and looked around the rolling green hills of the cemetery. He could just see Wendy standing with her cellphone on the spine of a hill about fifty yards away.

"Oh, yeah, Wendy," he said. "What's up?"

"Could... could you come here for a minute?"

Kevin looked back at the funeral. The caskets were being lowered into the graves with electric winches. He shrugged. Ian was right. He already knew what the preacher and the family were going to say. He already knew all the sad little encouragements everybody was going to whisper to everybody else.

"Sure," he told Wendy. "Be right there."

He closed his phone and started up the slope toward Wendy. He found her a few moments later, standing by Jason's gravestone, staring at the inscription. It read: "JASON ROBERT WISE 1988—2005," and under that "BELOVED SON." Not "BEST BUDDY," not "BOYFRIEND," just "BELOVED SON" as if Jay's mom was the only one who lost him. Not that Kevin could really hold that against Rita Wise. She was so devastated by the loss of her only son that she had not spoken a single word since the funeral. Kevin had stopped by her place the day after the funeral to make sure she was alright, only to find her stern, mannish older sister there, frowning at him through the door chain like he was some sort of vacuum cleaner salesman or a Jehovah's Witness.

"Yes?" the woman had said, arching an overplucked eyebrow.

"I'm, uh," Kevin had stammered. "Well, I mean, I was Jason's best friend. I was at the funeral. Remember? I'm the one who helped Rita back to her car. I just wanted to see if she needed anything."

The woman had sniffed and closed the door, undone the chain, and opened it again, stepping aside to allow Jason to enter, while making him feel as unwelcome as possible.

"Well," she said. "You may as well say goodbye."

It was so strange walking into Jay's familiar house and knowing he was not there, would never be there again. Kevin had spent so much

time there over the years that it seemed more like home than his own house, and now it had become like some sort of weird museum. Everything was just like Jay had left it. A DVD that Jay had rented and never had a chance to watch, nearly a week overdue, sat untouched on the coffee table. Beside it was an open jar of all natural peanut butter with a spoon sticking out. Jay had always been weird about his diet, and had had a habit of eating the stuff straight out of the jar because he had read about it in some body-building magazine. And in the center of this frozen shrine to her dead son, Rita sat on the couch like a little girl, knees drawn up to her chest.

She looked terrible. She was a really good-looking woman, not just for her age, but for any age. Though Jay's dad was out of the picture long before Kevin met Jay, Jay obviously got his good looks from Rita. She was tall and stunning in a bossy, dominatrix kind of way, so it was really disturbing to see her so shrunken and beaten down by grief. Her long dark hair, normally pulled back in a sleek bun, was loose and unwashed, hanging in greasy tangles. Her face was hollow and raw, her eyes and nose red from crying. She wore loose sweatpants and had a knitted blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

"A boy is here to see you," the older woman said, too loud, as if speaking to a slow child.

"Hey, Rita," Kevin said softly. "How ya doing?"

Rita's head turned towards him, slow and smooth as if operated by hydraulics. Her eyes did not seem to see him. She did not speak.

"Say goodbye to her," the older woman said again. "Rita." She raised her voice again. "It's time to go now."

That's when Kevin noticed the suitcases by the door.

"Where is she going?" he asked, frowning.

"She needs rest," the older woman replied. "I'm taking her back to Mother's house in Wisconsin."

"Oh..." Kevin said.

Jay had always hated his grandmother for her controlling, criticizing and mean-spirited treatment of Rita. She made no secret of the fact that she thought her youngest daughter was the lowest kind of slut for getting knocked up with Jason out of wedlock. Rita

couldn't possibly want to go stay with that old bitch, but she was getting up off the couch and moving towards the door.

Kevin thought Rita was just going to walk right past him, but then at the last second, she turned and pulled him into a desperate, clutching embrace that took his breath away. She was so thin, he could feel every bone in her back as he patted her awkwardly, trying to comfort her and knowing there was really no such thing as comfort for her. He was deeply embarrassed to notice that she smelled bad, like she had not showered in days. She had always been so neat and clean, a by-product of her training as a nurse, and her current lack of hygiene disturbed Kevin on a level too profound to even express.

The older woman gripped Rita's scrawny arm and pulled her away from Kevin, steering her towards the door.

"That's enough now, Rita," she said.

"Goodbye, Rita," Kevin half whispered. "Take care, okay?"

Rita did not reply. Kevin looked back at the overdue DVD on the coffee table and wondered if he should offer to return it, but he couldn't seem to make his mouth move.

"Well then," the older woman said abruptly, and Kevin took that as his cue to get out of that stuffy, awful shrine.

He nodded and turned to go, but as he moved past Rita, she reached out and pressed something into his hand. Her eyes met his for a flickering fragment of a second, and Kevin thought he saw a glimpse of the old Rita peeking out from behind the cold, wordless madness. Then she tucked her head down and turned away as the older woman opened the door for Kevin. He left, unable to look back.

It was not until he was behind the wheel of his truck that he looked down at the object that Rita had given him. It was a chipped and faded action figure of Batman. Jason had tons of Batman figures, but this was Lightning Strike Batman, who had white bolts of lightning all over his costume and had some kind of special power that Kevin couldn't quite remember. That figure had been Jason's favorite when he was a kid and he carried it everywhere. He'd had it in his pocket the day he and Kevin met. Kevin still had his own corresponding Joker figure sitting on top of his computer, though he had lost the

helmet and jetpack that came with it long ago. Jason and Kevin had spent endless hours playing Batman vs Joker in the scrappy woods behind Jason's house and in a strange way, those childhood roles had sort of defined their relationship for all time. Jason was the strong and heroic good guy and Kevin the mischievous, wisecracking villain. Sitting there in his truck, holding the tiny Batman figure in his big, bulky, grown up hand, Kevin had cried silently for nearly an hour.

Kevin had the little plastic figure in his breast pocket as he stood there in front of Jason's grave. He could feel its little feet and elbows pressing against the left side of his chest, just below his aching heart. He wondered how much longer it would keep on hurting like this, and when he was ever going to stop feeling like Jay ought to be there, standing beside Wendy, while Kevin lay cold and lifeless in the dirt, instead of the other way around. Where was the justice in a world where the brave hero died young and the villain had to keep on living, to try and find some way to define himself without his long time adversary?

On the other side of the grave, Wendy seemed to be listening or waiting for something to happen. She was dressed in a very plain, black dress, just a sleeveless, loose fitting sheath beneath a lightweight black sweater. Her hair was gathered away from her pale, make-up free face in a thoughtless knot. She looked beautiful, so much so that Kevin had to look away, suddenly swamped with confusing emotions. He put his hand on the cold curve of Jason's headstone.

"What are you doing up here in the nose bleed seats?" he asked, trying for his usual humor, and ending up with a kind of forced and anxious tone that did not quite cover the cold and hopeless grief beneath. "I could have gotten you second row."

Wendy didn't look up. "I didn't want to upset anyone by being there," she said.

Kevin shook his head. "Oh, you would have been second runner up in that department," he said. "Ian went off on the minister. Got the evil eye from the families. It was classic."

Wendy tried to smile, but couldn't seem to make it happen. "I... I was just wondering if I could feel Jay's... whatever... presence or

spirit or something. But now that I'm here... there's nothing." She shrugged. "If there's any place that makes you feel that there isn't any life after death, it's a cemetery. Nothing but cold stones and sorrow."

"Yeah," Kevin said. "I know what you mean."

He turned and looked back the way he had come. Down the hill Ashley and Ashlyn's funeral was breaking up, the family and friends wandering slowly back to their cars. He heard the bulldozer start up. It began pushing a mound of dirt into Ashley's—or was it Ashlyn's—grave.

"I haven't felt Jay's presence either," he said. "Not him or Carrie. Not here, at home, at school, anywhere. And I'll tell you I've tried hard. Real hard."

"I thought, maybe..." She paused, and Kevin could see her fighting tooth and nail against the threat of tears.

He grimaced, feeling a powerful urge to put his arms around her and comfort her, but not sure his attentions would be welcome. She seemed so small and fragile, slender and waifish where Carrie had been curvy and vivacious. He took a step forward, then stopped as Wendy looked up, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"That night," she said. "Before we got on the ride, Jason said 'Your fear is from a sense of having no control.'" She frowned. "I've felt that fear since. the moment he said it. I thought the fear might have even caused the... the hallucination I had."

"The vision," Kevin said.

"If you want to call it that," she said. "Though honestly, calling it that scares the shit out of me." She looked down at the bright clutter of wilting flowers around the foot of Jason's grave. "Anyway, the fear, it feels like more than just being scared. It's almost like a... a presence. Like a living thing, always with me, always hanging over my shoulder."

"You think it's Jason?" Kevin asked, spooked and only half humoring her.

She shook her head vehemently. "No," she said. "I know it's not. Definitely. This, whatever it is, makes me feel the total opposite of

how Jason made me feel. Its like cold ice around my spine, all the time."

"That's rough," said Kevin, because he didn't know what else to say. "Maybe it's just shock. Maybe it'll go away after a while."

He looked back to the winding road. His truck was one of the few vehicles still there. He didn't see Wendy's ride. "Well, I should probably get going. My dad..."

"Wait," said Wendy. "I haven't showed you that thing I wanted to show you."

He turned back to her. "Huh?" he asked. "What is it?"

She bit her lip, seeming suddenly shy. "Well," she said. "First let me say that I'm starting to change my mind about what you said the other day."

He looked up sharply. "What?"

"You know," she said, "about that flight where all the people who got off before it blew up died? I think... I think, I'm afraid..."

"That it's happening now?" Kevin asked, incredulous.

She nodded and reached into her purse. "Here," she said. "Have a look at these."

She pulled out a messy pile of digital photos of varying quality, printed out on glossy photo paper. She handed the top one to Kevin. He looked at it, unsure. It was a printout of the cover of The Who's album "Who are you?" The photo was of the band posing back stage. Drummer Keith Moon straddled a chair that was stenciled with the words "Not to be taken away."

Kevin raised an eyebrow, confused. "Ooookay," he said. "The Who, old British band, *Tommy* and all that. What about 'em?"

Wendy tapped the picture. "Look at the chair Keith Moon is sitting on," she said. "See here it says, 'not to be taken away. He died twenty days after the album was released."

Kevin frowned, still not getting it. "Uh-huh," he said. "So you're being haunted by the ghost of Keith Moon?"

Wendy pursed her lips, obviously annoyed by his flippancy. She handed him another photo. It was a posed portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was smiling, but an eerie line cut through the top of the image and veered through his head at an angle.

Kevin looked up, waiting for the explanation. "Okay. And..."

"That is the last photograph Lincoln ever posed for," she said. "The photographic plate was cracked when it was taken out of the camera. You see the line? It goes right through his head, exactly where John Wilkes Booth shot him."

Kevin scowled at the photograph. "Okay," he said. "I think I see where you're going with this. Any more?"

Wendy passed him a third photo. "This one was taken by a guy named Mark Phillips, just a few seconds after the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center."

Kevin looked at it. It was a picture of fire and smoke pouring out of the second tower. Within the smoke could be seen what looked like a demonic face. He looked up at Wendy, a bit more skeptical this time.

"I don't know about this one," he said. "It's more like one of those Rorschach tests, where you see what you want to see. Or like one of those faked up Weekly Enquirer photos..."

"Okay, fine," Wendy said. "Take a look at this."

She handed him a photo torn from an old newspaper. It showed a fatal freeway pile up. The tangle of twisted, blackened metal was ugly and grim, but Kevin couldn't see what this had to do with Lincoln and Keith Moon and the World Trade Center.

"This accident occurred one year to the day after the flight One Eighty disaster you told me about," Wendy said. "Look at the road sign."

He squinted at the grainy photo. In the left corner of the photo, he could make out a mobile traffic alert sign. It read: "CONSTRUCTION AHEAD 180 FEET." He paused, struggling between wanting to believe what she was showing him, and wanting to deny it.

"Look," he said. "I guess you're showing this to me because I'm the one who put this in your head, with all that stuff about the Flight 180 business. I'm pretty convinced that did happen, and... and maybe it's happening here too. But just because you believe one screwy thing, that doesn't mean you should grab at every weirdo theory that comes down the pike because you're desperate for some kind of answer. You let that shit get out of control and pretty soon you're on the street,

wearing a tin foil hat and telling people the government is beaming mind control waves into your..."

Angry, Wendy snatched another print out off her stack and held it out to him. "I took this picture that night," she said. "The night of the crash."

Kevin looked back down at the growing stack, trying to focus, then took the picture from Wendy's hand. It was the picture Wendy had taken at the clown shoot booth at Red River. Ashlyn and Ashley were in the center of a crowd of boys, shooting water pistols. Nothing odd there, Kevin thought, except their skin was glowing crimson red, and their hair was tinged with hot orange highlights from some bright light out of the picture. It looked unnervingly like they were on fire.

"Well," he said, trying to be logical about it all. "You just shot it when some light went off. It's not like..."

Wendy pushed another picture at him. He looked at it. It was Jason, arm in arm with the Devil's Flight demon. Behind him was the looping rail of the coaster. The train of cars was aiming right for his head. Kevin swallowed.

"How many of these do you have?" he asked, fighting back the slick coiling dread inside his belly.

Wendy held up the rest of her stack of paper. "I took a lot of photos that night, Kevin," she said.

A cold, nauseous shudder skittered over the surface of Kevin's skin, chilly sweat soaking his uncomfortable suit.

"Oh, shit," he said. "And... and they're all..."

Wendy shrugged, her face creased with worry.

"Maybe yes," she said. "Maybe no. You can't look at Ashley and Ashlyn's picture and say, 'Oh, they're going to burn to death in a freak tanning bed accident.' It's more like a hint. And the other photos could be hints too, or..."

"Or," Kevin replied, "this could all be a bunch of bullshit we're making up out of our heads because we're so freaked out about all the shit that's happened."

Wendy nodded, then suddenly swayed and stumbled. She steadied herself on Jason's headstone and shook her head.

Kevin stepped toward her, concerned. "Jeez," he said, "Are you alright?"

"I'm... I'm fine," Wendy replied, though she sounded anything but fine. "I'm just a little tired. That's all."

Kevin put a concerned hand on her arm. "When was the last time you had anything to eat?" he asked.

Wendy scowled at him. "You sound like my mom," she told him.

"I'm serious, Wendy," Kevin said.

"I..." Wendy looked away. "Uh, yesterday, maybe?"

"Yesterday maybe?" Kevin took her arm and turned her toward the parking lot. "Okay, come on. We can't have you dropping dead in a cemetery. That's just not right. Burgers on me, what do you say?"

She looked up at him, face tired and grateful, nodding like a child. It made Kevin feel good to finally be able to do something concrete to help Wendy, to take care of her like he'd promised Jay he would. For the first time since the accident, he almost felt like himself again.

# TWELVE

Frank Cheek stood in the damp, musty confines of his bachelor's bathroom, staring at his brand new, bleached blond hair. Well, it had said blond on the box, but it was really more like a sort of loud, brassy orange. Less Dolph Lungren and more Bozo the Clown. He'd known that using his roommate's photo on that Internet dating website was going to get him into trouble.

Frank's roommate Sean never seemed to have any problem scoring. He was blond and sly with underwear model looks and a kind of bad boy charisma that chicks ate up with two forks. He seemed to have a different broad every night of the week. Frank mostly hung around Sean hoping to scoop up a few sloppy seconds, but since they'd moved in together last spring, Frank hadn't gotten lucky even once.

When Sean suggested that Frank try signing up for one of those online hook-up services, he was skeptical to say the least.

"Come on, dude," Frank said. "How am I gonna know the chick I'm writing to isn't some fat, ugly beast?"

"They post photos," Sean replied. "Come on, you've bought things online before, right? Take a chance, Frankie boy. Just think of it as pussy eBay."

Frank shrugged and said maybe he would give it a try.

It wasn't until a week later that he signed on to HotMatch.com. After some creative truth stretching in his personal information, particularly in the "height" and "income" boxes, he went searching through his hard drive for a decent picture of himself. He rejected one after the other until he came to a shot of him and Sean together in front of Sean's brand new cherry red '05 Mustang GT convertible. He opened the picture in Photoshop and started selecting the area to crop Sean out of the shot, but then hesitated. He opened the pulsing rectangle around Sean instead, framing his friend so that the bottom of the picture ended just below the ostentatiously large bulge in the crotch of Sean's jeans. What would it hurt to use Sean's photo? By the time chicks found out Frank had used someone else's picture,

they would already be there with him, and he was sure he could charm them into forgiving him. He made sure enough of the sporty ride was in the shot to let them think he drove a cool car. Chicks love fast cars. It would be no big deal to get Sean to let him borrow the Pony for his first couple of hot dates.

Frank checked in on HotMatch.com regularly for several weeks and got no responses. Disheartened, he checked less and less often. Then the whole Red River thing happened and he forgot all about it. He had other stuff on his mind. Two days ago, out of the blue, he had received notification of a message from a girl calling herself "mandicat." He signed on and clicked on her name to check out her profile. To his surprise, she was a hot little spinner with a tight, rockin bod and cute, freckled face. He didn't even bother to read about how she loved cats, rollerblading and Gwen Stefani, and whatever other bullshit. He just scrolled down to her physical stats. Eighteen years old. Five foot one, one hundred and one pounds, 32-22-32. Nice. She claimed to be looking for "hot, sexy guys who want to party." Frank wanted to party all right. He opened her message.

**i luv yr hot rod. yr car is nice 2 ;- ) how bout a ride? xoxo mandi**

He must have composed twenty replies, erasing one after the other before they could be sent. He paced and fretted, and whipped himself into near hysterics, until finally, he simply asked her where and when he could pick her up. Centuries seemed to go by while he waited for her response, but when it came, his jaw dropped.

**6pm friday night@ the peppermint panda, 15th and cole, but only if we can ride with the top down! xoxo mandi**

She had attached a slightly overexposed photo of herself with a big drunken grin, and the neckline of her shirt pulled down to expose sweet and perky little tits. Frank's kind of girl! Plus the Peppermint Panda was a titty bar. She must be a stripper, getting off the afternoon shift at six, obviously a total slut. Frank would be practically guaranteed to get some.

Even the news of Ashley and Ashlyn's horrible deaths could not get Frank down. In a way he felt bad about what had happened to them, and about missing their joint funeral, but after all, they had blown

him off over and over. They thought they were too good for him and now that they were dead. Frank didn't see any point wasting time crying over spilled milk when he had his hot date to think of.

He didn't sleep a wink that night. He was far too wound up. When he finally gave up and got out of bed that morning, he spontaneously decided to bleach his hair, figuring that way it would be easy to claim that the picture of Sean was just an old picture of himself. Never mind that Sean was a good six inches taller and forty-five pounds heavier, or that he was muscular and handsome while Frank was scrawny and chicken chested. As the vicious chemical goo soaked into Frank's hair, filling the bathroom with a harsh, noxious stench like the stuff the school janitor used to clean the toilets, Frank schemed and plotted to figure what he was going to tell Mandi. He decided he would say that he had been sick. That he'd had cancer and lost weight, but after a long, brave battle, he'd finally beaten it, and was trying to get back to his former shape. Girls loved that kind of Oprah tearjerker bullshit. Perfect.

As he rinsed the bleach out of his hair in the mildewed shower stall, he let his mind run wild imagining the things that Mandi would do to him. Maybe she would give him a smoker while he was driving. That would be so awesome, though if Sean found out he would have Frank's ass. Still, to get a blowjob from a hot stripper while going ninety miles per hour in a hot Mustang GT—that would be worth any kind of retribution. He could die happy after that.

But the bleach blond hair hadn't come out so good. He didn't look anything like Sean, who was a natural blond, and whose longish, tousled hair was a complex kaleidoscope of sun-bleached highlights and warm brandy undertones. The unvaried, single shade of brassy orange that Frank's hair had become made his sallow complexion look yellowy and jaundiced. Plus, the strong bleaching chemicals had brutalized Frank's thin, oily hair, frizzing it out into a ragged near-Afro of split ends and knots. He was supposed to meet Mandi in less than two hours. He had no choice but to tie a red bandanna around the worst of it and hope for the best.

Slinking back to his room, he threw on some black jeans and gave a few crumpled T-shirts the sniff test before selecting a relatively

clean one. Then, at the last minute, he decided to wear the silver mud flap girl necklace he had won at Red. River. He regarded himself in the smeary, full-length mirror inside his closet. Yeah, too fucking sharp. Absolutely. Watch out Mandi, Frankie's here to drive you around the block.

Frank wandered out into the living room. The television was on, showing some loud, gory. horror movie, but the room was empty. Their ratty, second-hand sofa was covered with a scattering of filmy, feminine under things. A pair of Sean's jeans lay inside out under the beer can-cluttered coffee table. Beneath the terrified screams and power tool racket of the horror movie, Frank could make out the unmistakable sounds of Sean nailing some broad in his room, pounding her into the headboard while she hollered and wailed and begged for more. Same shit, different dame. Frank sighed. He had been hoping to talk Sean into letting him borrow the Pony, but Sean was clearly otherwise engaged.

Frank toed his roommate's crumpled jeans and a cascade of change spilled out of the pocket onto the spotty blue carpet, along with the key to the 'Stang.

Frank threw a surreptitious glance back at his roommate's closed door. He squatted down and snagged the key, closing it in his sweaty fist. Surely Sean wouldn't mind. He was busy anyway. He had practically promised that he would let Frank use his car. What was the point of interrupting him when he was in mid-bang? That would be bad manners. Better to just leave a note.

Frank shuffled through the piles of unpaid bills and takeout menus on the kitchen counter until he found an empty envelope and a giveaway pen from a gynecologist's office.

Sean, he wrote. You seemed busy so I didn't want to interrupt. Anyway, thanks for letting me have the Pony for my hot date. You're the best. Gory details when I return. Your pal, Frank.

That's good enough, Frank thought, folding the note and setting it on top of the television. He hoped the loud movie and Sean's own noisy endeavors would drown out the throaty rumble of the 'Stang's powerful V8 engine as Frank slid her out of the driveway, just in case Sean changed his mind at the last minute. Frank gave himself one

last once over in the hallway mirror, and headed out. As he left, he decided to grab his video camera. Mandi was a stripper after all, used to showing it off on a daily basis, so she probably wouldn't object to his capturing the event for posterity. Just so long as she didn't wig out about the whole business with Sean's photo...

Sitting in the driver's seat of Sean's convertible Mustang, Frank felt all his doubts and worries slip away. This car was better than a vibrator. There was no way a chick could sit in this car and not want to blow the guy driving it. He slid the key into the ignition and paused, waiting to see if Sean would come running, naked and sweaty and gunning for bear at the sound of his beloved ride taking off without him.

Nothing happened. Frank let out the breath he had been holding and put the car in gear, rolling slowly out into the street. He looked down at his watch. Shit. He was almost an hour early. What the hell was he supposed to do for a whole hour? Driving down the main drag and enjoying the appreciative glances of everyone he passed, Frank decided he should grab a quick bite or something. He needed to keep his strength up. Sean would have a fit if he knew Frank was eating a burger in his precious car, but to be honest, that was not the messiest thing he planned to do in the Mustang that night. What Sean didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Frank smiled and turned into the drive through of the Butchie Burger.

# THIRTEEN

Hank Trayne sat behind the wheel of the crummy, rented box truck, waiting at a red light. The truck was a shuddering, mismatched bucket of bolts that had clearly been bought at auction when it became too old and crotchety for a legit truck rental company. The familiar logo of the former company had been thinly painted over, and the ugly new blue and orange logo E-Z MOVE had been plastered, crookedly on top.

It had no air, no power steering, and nothing but a weak, staticky radio. The rearview mirror had a long, thin crack down the center, and the sun visor on the driver's side would not stay up. Still, it was the best that Hank could get, with no notice and no credit card, and even then he had to call in a major favor from an old drinking buddy who was the E-Z MOVE manager.

Hank had been driving in pointless circles for more than three hours and had absolutely no idea where he was going. He didn't want to admit it, but he was really hoping that Brenda would call and ask him to come back.

Brenda, that bitch. She hadn't even given Hank a chance. When he came home still bombed from this latest two-day bender—of which he remembered less than six hours worth of events, mostly at the beginning—he found all his things on the lawn and the lock changed. Brenda would not answer the door, no matter how hard he pounded, and eventually that nosy little fag next door had called the cops on Hank. A lady cop went inside to talk to Brenda and when that lady cop came back out she had a real serious look on her face. She shook her head at Hank and told him that Brenda never wanted to see him again. He had no choice. He had to leave. Of course, Brenda's name was on everything, since it had been her place to start with, and Hank couldn't pass a credit check to save his life since he owed about a billion dollars to pretty much everyone on earth. Every single month, he gave Brenda almost every cent he earned from his job at the Home Land warehouse, minus beer money, of course, to put

towards the phone, the rent and the gas and all that, but apparently that didn't mean shit, just because her name was on all the checks.

Driving around aimlessly, Hank couldn't figure out where things had gone so wrong with Brenda. When they first met, she was a fun, outgoing woman who loved hitting the bars and painting the town red. She was so pretty, like one of them Victoria Secret girls, and she was six years younger than Hank. He couldn't believe it when she started flirting with him that night in the Roost. She was wearing pretty gold earrings and a classy outfit with nylons and heels. She drank Cosmopolitans, or Cosmos as she called them, and crossed her legs back and forth while occasionally dangling her shoe off her elegant, narrow foot. It didn't seem possible to Hank that she didn't have a guy. A body like that sleeping alone at night was like some kind of crime or something.

Hank, on the other hand, didn't have all that much to offer. He was just another blue-collar knucklehead with a face like an old pit bull and ten bucks to his name. Still, she didn't seem to care. She walked right over with her clicking heels and long, nyloned legs whispering as they brushed together under her tight skirt, and asked if he wanted to play pool with her. She beat him three times in a row. As she bent down to sink the eight ball one more time, cleavage pale and glorious in the deep V of her silky blouse and dark eyes smoldering, she asked him if he wanted to try a different game. They never made it back to her place and wound up doing it in the passenger's seat of his battered black Rivera. She was so good it scared him.

His friends all joked about it, but she just couldn't seem to get enough of him. He bragged and tried to take all the credit, but in truth, he wasn't sure what she saw in him. He was terrified that she would wise up, realize that he was just a no account loser and move on to greener pastures.

Hank's life had not panned out the way he had hoped. He was still doing exactly the same thing he had been doing in high school, only somehow it was twenty-five years later. Still working a crummy job and making just enough for bills and beer, and still killing time in the same bars with the same bunch of losers. He had once harbored vague fantasies of learning some kind of skill and scoring a plum

Union gig with full bennies and everything, but time just got away from him and all of a sudden he was forty-one. He had become an old dog, incapable of learning new tricks.

Brenda had made him feel like a kid again. He bought himself new clothes, not just the same old jeans and T-shirts from the Good Will, but sharp threads with class. If you looked up class in the dictionary, you'd see a picture of Brenda. She worked for a computer company and was real smart. She was a career woman. Hank wanted to make sure that he looked good next to her. He got his hair cut in a shorter, more trendy style that needed hair gel to make it stand up right. He bought decent shoes, stashing the old engineer boots in the back of the closet. Brenda liked nice restaurants and art galleries and things. She expanded his horizons and he felt he owed it to her to look as good as she made him feel.

He was spending so much time at her place that it seemed ridiculous for him to pay rent on a place he never used. He told his roommate Jim that he was moving in with Brenda and Jim wasn't even mad. He was happy for Frank. Jim said he wished them both the best. There was something kinda wistful in Jim's face when he said that, that might have made Hank feel bad if he wasn't so busy being head over heels in love.

Those first couple of months living with Brenda were like heaven. Her place was clean and airy and full of sunshine. It smelled like her. She was Italian and liked to cook for him, spaghetti and meatballs, and veal parmagean and lasagna, and then she would work all that good food off him in bed. She would massage his neck while they watched TV so he didn't even mind letting her pick the shows. On weekends they would go out barhopping and she I would always play Bon Jovi on the jukebox, dancing with her hair down and her shoes off. All the men would stare at this sexy display and Hank would just smile and nod, knowing they all wished they were him. Brenda was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Although he had tried and tried to figure out exactly when it had gone wrong, he still could not put his finger on an exact moment. Brenda had started to complain about his drinking, just a little at first—a warning look or a little wordless sound—but then she got

more and more vocal about it. He was having some trouble in bed on the weekends and she took it real personal. He had even passed out on her while she was going down on him one night, and he woke up with her hitting him in the chest with her little fists and crying hysterically: as if he did it on purpose or because she wasn't any good. Christ, she was the best, no bones about it. It wasn't that; it was just that he drank a little bit too much that one time. It was nothing personal, but it took several days of flowers and promises to cut down to smooth that one over. Of course, he never did cut down and things went rapidly from bad to worse.

She didn't want to go out anymore on weekends. No more pool, no more Cosmos, no more dancing with her dark, shiny hair flying around her smiling face. She developed a constant, disapproving frown, bitchy and petulant. When she found out that he still planned to go out without her, she threw stuff at him and told him she hoped he crashed his car and died. What the hell was he supposed to do? Stay home and drink, like some kind of alcoholic?

That was the first of the real serious fights. She would scream and holler and call him all kinds of names, and then just stand around frowning and silent as he searched for his car keys. She put a lock on the bedroom door and refused to let him in when he came home from the bars. He slept on the couch more and more often, even on weekdays, with the TV for company and a single thin blanket wrapped around his miserable body. He missed sleeping next to her more than anything else.

He watched this inevitable decline of his relationship and it terrified him. He'd never had anything as good as the relationship he had with Brenda, and he probably never would again, but he did not know how to save it. The only thing he could think of was to drink even more. With enough beers in him, he felt sure that she was just another suffocating bitch, like they all are, and he would be better off without her. He slept with other women—women who were not even one tenth as beautiful as Brenda—just to "show her." to prove to her that he didn't need her as much as he knew in his heart that he did. Then it really started getting ugly.

He was pretty sure she had something going on the side, some yuppie fuckstick from work, and that made him completely insane with jealousy. He felt like he was clutching at the broken shards of what he used to have, desperate to put them back together somehow, and in the end only succeeding in slicing up his fingers. Next thing he knew, all his things were on the lawn.

So he drove, swigging from his fourteenth beer since the eviction and not even caring if he got cited for an open container. Every single song on the radio seemed specifically chosen to make him feel worse. When Bon Jovi's "I'll Be There For You" came on, he had to turn the radio off, because the maudlin wave of boozy sorrow that washed over him was so strong that he felt almost sick to his stomach. The little pre-paid cellphone that Brenda had given him sat on the cracked vinyl seat beside him, defiantly silent. He wondered if Jim might let him crash for a few days, maybe even let him have his old room back, if Jim didn't have someone else living there by now. He just kept hoping that she would call. Just maybe, if he drove around long enough, she would call and say that it was just a misunderstanding. Maybe...

It was nearly five in the afternoon. He knew he needed to figure something out before it got too late, but his stomach was suddenly excruciatingly aware of how long it had been since he had eaten anything. He didn't exactly feel hungry, just sick and empty and hollow. He figured it would be smart to put a little something in there before he got too deep into the case of Bud under the passenger seat. Maybe he should hit the drive thru or something. He didn't feel like interacting with humans. He was cresting the top of a hill and there was a Butchie Burger down at the bottom on the left. That would probably do the trick.

He sped up to pass a little yellow Mini, wishing for some of Brenda's special spaghetti and meatballs instead of a cheap burger, and hating her and missing her all at the same time. As he headed down towards the familiar black and white checkered building that housed the Butchie Burger, smoke suddenly started to billow from underneath the hood. The engine coughed, spluttered and stalled and, just to top it all off, Hank spotted a sharp twist of metal in the

road ahead. It was too late to swerve, and the useless old truck couldn't have turned in time anyway. There was a sound like a shot, followed by the distinctive *thumpety thumpety thump* of a flat tire flapping against the dented wheel rim.

Hank tried to coast as far to the right as he could, struggling to maneuver the pathetic old beast out of traffic. Great. Fucking fantastic. As if this day didn't suck enough already, here he was broken down, with all his worldly possessions, in the middle of the goddamn road. He got out and went around to the front of the truck, spitefully kicking the bald flat tire. There was a thick, burnt stench boiling out from under the hood when he opened it, making him cough and spit... He picked up the little cellphone and called the Roost.

"Roost," Gilbert, the Roost's regular bartender hissed into the receiver.

In the background, Hank could hear the sharp crack of pool balls, the clink of glasses and the low beat of the juke. He wished like hell that he could just slide right through the phone line and be there instead of here. He'd give his left nut to be sitting at one end of the bar, with a nice cold one making a wet ring on the napkin under it, watching some girls whisper and giggle and fix their lipstick down at the other end. He sighed.

"Gil?" he said. "Hank. Louie there?"

"Yup," Gil replied.

"How is he?" Hank asked.

"Conscious," Gil said. "Sort of."

"Listen, Gil," Hank said, waving for a honking, angry yuppie to pass. The guy gave Hank a look, zipping past in his slick little sports car like a shiny black watermelon seed with wheels. "Hey fuck you, pal. Not you, Gil. So listen, can you see if Louie can give me a tow?"

"I don't know, Frank," Gil said. "Louie's pretty toasty. Don't you have Triple A?"

"No I don't have fucking Triple A," Hank spat. "Brenda had Triple A, but seeing as she just kicked me and everything I own to the fucking curb, I'm thinking she's not gonna be any help either."

"Brenda threw you out?" Gil asked, his voice softer, sympathetic.  
"That sucks, dude."

"You're damn right it sucks," Hank said, "but right now that's the least of my problems. So go fish Louie out of the peanut bowl and tell him I'm on Grand, right at the top of that hill near the Butchie Burger."

"All right," said Gil.

Hank flipped the little phone shut and put his hand over his eyes.

# FOURTEEN

"Look," Mitch Pearson said, gripping the wheel with suppressed tension. "We've been up and down this block eight times now. We're never gonna find it."

Mitch was in his mid-thirties, a bland, sandy-haired everyman that most people would have trouble picking out of a lineup. His clothes were purchased from familiar mid-range catalogues, off-white polo shirt, khakis and loafers, all identical to those worn by thousands of other American men in his age and income bracket. Beneath the clothes, his pale body was totally ordinary, medium in every dimension and just beginning the mid-life decent into paunchiness. His SUV was equally forgettable, a tan 2003 Ford Escape.

His wife Jennifer was as forgettable as her husband, blonde and plain, and still trying to lose the weight she'd put on when she was pregnant with their youngest. She battled against her own mundanity, tooth and nail, by grasping at every odd or quirky trend that popped up in whatever women's magazine she happened to glance through on the supermarket checkout line. This month it was a hippy, gypsy bohemian, handcrafted-by-indigenous-peoples-of-whatever sort of look. It involved lots of beads and bangles, and made her sound like some kind of ethnic percussion instrument any time she moved. The clack and rattle of her heavy wooden bracelets as she folded her arms across her chest set Mitch's teeth on edge. She did that moist, sniffly thing with the big eyes and the quivery lower lip, clutching her turquoise and silver-encrusted fingers over her heart.

"But MI-tchell," she said in her best quavering, little girl voice. "He was hurt. He was limping and might have been hit by a car or something."

Mitch sighed. He knew there was no hope for him. He and Jennifer had been together since high school, fourteen years now, and he knew that once she got her sights locked on some poor, pathetic little furry creature there would be no stopping her.

Jennifer had been driving back from her afternoon hatha yoga class, on her way to pick up their five year-old daughter Chakra from Ballet, when she had spotted a scruffy, mixed breed mutt in the middle of the road. The dog had a broken leather belt cinched tight around its neck and was limping heavily on one back leg, stopping every few minutes to lick the leg that was injured. His broad, black face looked like a friendly teddy bear and his hipbones and ribs were clearly visible beneath his dirty, black and tan fur.

Jennifer had pulled over and called to the dog, but he was too scared to come to her. She had no choice but to leave and pick up Chakra, because who knew what sort of perverts waited around the ballet school watching out for kids that didn't get picked up on time. As she drove home, she couldn't even concentrate on Chakra's chattering about her upcoming recital. She had not been able to put that poor, poor dog out of her mind.

They already had two rescued dogs and three cats, and there was no way they could take in another animal. The Homeowners Association in their gated community had already had a meeting about the Pearsons and issued a warning. No more pets. It wasn't even open for discussion, but still, Jennifer would get that sniffly look and Mitch knew it was hopeless. There was no use fighting her about it. It would almost be easier to buy another house than to deal with Jennifer when she didn't get her way.

So Jennifer sent Chakra next door to play with the neighbor's kids Jaden and Shae, strapped two year-old Chandler into his car seat, and the next thing Mitch knew, he was driving up and down the Grand looking for some mangy stray mutt that was probably miles away by now. Chandler was lucky. He was snoozing, oblivious in his car seat.

"Turn around here," Jennifer said. "He might have gone back around the Butchie Burger. There's dumpsters and things back there. The poor thing was so skinny you could just about count every rib."

Mitch nodded and obediently turned their SUV into the Butchie Burger parking lot. After a moment of hesitation, Mitch pulled into the drive through lane, behind a black pickup truck with two teenagers inside.

"MI-tchell!" Jennifer said, voice cranking up into a note of warning as distinct as the sound of the rattle on a venomous snake's tail. "What are you doing?"

Mitch had to think fast. The wrong answer would be deadly, but Mitch had been diffusing Jennifer's bombs for fourteen years. He knew how to stay cool under pressure. In truth, he was starving and had put off his lunch to go on this ridiculous wild goose hunt. He refused to continue with this foolishness on an empty stomach, but if he told that to Jennifer he'd be on the couch for a week.

"Honey," he said, with his old reliable non-threatening talking the suicide off the ledge tone. "I just thought maybe if we had a little piece of hamburger to offer, the dog would be more likely to come close enough for us to catch it. You said yourself that he was really scared. Maybe we can get him into the back of the car more easily if we have some kind of treat."

"Yeah," Jennifer said, twisting the hem of her expensive, Indian cotton tank top between her anxious fingers. "That's a wonderful idea, Mitch. He looked so hungry. Poor thing probably hasn't eaten anything but trash in days and days."

SCORE! Mitch thought. She bought it. No problem. Of course, the dog didn't need a large black and white Butchie malt too, but hey, they were already here.

"When we get him home," Jennifer said, "we can give him some of Luba's food, since Buster is on the special kidney stuff." She looked out of her window, eyes searching everywhere. "I think we should call him Teddy. He looks just like a teddy bear."

"Honey," Mitch said. "You know we can't take him back to our house. Remember the homeowners..."

He knew he was in trouble before he even finished the sentence. Her face went dark and stormy, brows pulled down and lower lip between her teeth.

"MI-tchell!" Again, that tense warning tone, the sound before the bite. "Where do you suggest we take him?"

"Well," Mitch said. "I thought maybe the animal shelter..."

If he thought he was in trouble before, he had really done it now. He had cut the wrong wire and the bomb blew up in his face.

"I can't believe you would even say that!" she spat. "You want to just dump the poor dog in a SHELTER? You want to see him in a filthy, disease-ridden death camp where he will be heartlessly EXECUTED in the GAS CHAMBER?"

It seemed completely ridiculous that they were having this argument about a dog that so far was nowhere to be found, but there was no avoiding it. She was on a roll. He just sighed and let the flames wash over him, waiting for it to be over.

# FIFTEEN

Wendy bounced limply against her safety belt in the passenger seat of Kevin's Ford Ranger pickup as he drove down the pot-holed suburban strip mall street that led down into the center of town. The bag filled with photos dangled from her slack fingers. Off to one side, above a car dealership, there was a billboard advertising: "McKinley Tri-Centennial Celebration. 1705—2005. Fireworks! Carnival! Colonial Village! Craft Fair!" Neither of them paid the jaunty sign any notice.

Wendy's focus was turned fiercely inward as she mulled over the recent tragedies and the questionable revelations of those creepy photos, and to a lesser degree, Kevin's sudden, almost mother-hen-like attitude towards her. She was simultaneously annoyed and charmed by his solicitous and protective body language as he ushered her around to the passenger side and opened the door for her. She found herself sneaking glances at him while he drove, so serious and drawn in his sober suit and tie. So utterly unlike the goofy boy who had joked about puking and taken a photo of Stacy's panties. She wondered how different she must look to him.

"The odds of two people," Kevin was saying, "best friends no less, dying in a freak accident, unrelated to the original accident, is like, worse than the odds of winning lotto."

"But," Wendy said, trying to convince herself as much as Kevin and not doing a very good job, "it's not impossible, right? It just could be a coincidence. Right?"

Kevin nodded, shrugging. "Sure, maybe," he said. "I guess the only way we'll know for sure is..."

He trailed off as he realized where the thought had taken him. Wendy finished it for him, hands spreading to cover the bag of photos with their bloody, damning evidence.

"...is if another one of us dies," she said.

Kevin shook his head. "Man," he said. "That's no way to live, just waiting to see who's next."

"No," Wendy agreed. "But I don't have any idea what else to do."

Kevin's brow wrinkled as he thought about it, remembering.

"Those kids on Flight 180 died in the order they would have died if they'd stayed on the plane," he told her. "The kids sitting closer to the front of the plane went first, then the ones further back, and then the ones behind them and so on, all the way down the line."

Wendy looked at him, a sharp frown drawing her brows together. "You think this is like that?" she asked. "That we're all going to die in the order we were sitting on the roller coaster? Don't you think that's kind of improbable? I mean couldn't someone farther back get killed first? Since when is Death so... so orderly?"

"Wendy," Kevin said. "I hate to bring this up, and I wouldn't if I didn't think it was important."

"What?" she asked.

"Do you remember your vision?" Kevin asked. "I mean the exact details of what would have happened to the ones who got off. To us."

Wendy narrowed her eyes. "I've been trying to forget," she said, looking away at the passing traffic.

"No, really," Kevin said. "Just think for a minute. Do you remember if the people on the roller coaster died in the order that they were seated in your vision?"

Wendy clenched her jaw. She had not spoken out loud about the specific details of her vision to anyone. Hearing Jason and Carrie screaming in terrified unison. Desperately trying to help Kevin hold on to Lewis and feeling the big jock's Raider's jersey slipping through her fingers. Feeling the hot wash of Kevin's blood as he was torn in two. All the awful details were still buried deeply inside her mind and to talk about them would make the vision real, legitimize it and give it power somehow. If she just didn't mention it or even think about it, it would evaporate like a bad dream.

Except it didn't. It just got more and more vivid, more intense, replaying itself again and again.

"I'm not sure," she lied.

"Wendy," Kevin said, clearly not buying the lie. "Come on."

"Okay," she said, more sharply than she meant to. "Okay, fine, you're right. They did all die in the order they were seated in my stupid vision. Are you happy now?"

"I'm sorry, Wendy," Kevin said quietly. "The last thing I want is to put you through that again, but just hear me out on this, okay? We could be talking absolute bullshit, like I said before, but, for the sake of argument, let's say the same thing that happened to Flight 180 is happening to us... Might be happening... Whatever. Of the people who got off, were Ashley and Ashlyn the closest to the front?"

Wendy frowned, trying to remember.

"I think so," she said. "I can't remember anybody ahead of them. Wait, hang on a second." She pulled the photos out of the bag and flipped quickly through them, then sighed. "I took a picture of the whole row of cars from our seat in the back, but I didn't print it out because it wasn't a picture of anybody, just a bunch of people's backs. And it didn't feel like the others, either."

"What do you mean 'feel like the others?'" Kevin asked, skeptical.

Wendy shrugged, uncomfortable talking about anything that reminded her of the feeling she'd had before the crash.

"I don't know," she said, fiddling with the catch on the glove box. "It's part of the fear thing I was talking about before. The presence. When I looked at the picture of Ashley and Ashlyn, I felt this... this instinct. I knew they were in trouble, and I knew there was a clue in the picture. Just like I knew the roller coaster was going to crash before it did." She sighed, twisting the knob on the glove box back and forth, back and forth. "I even called them to try to warn them. To try to stop them from going, but I was too late. I didn't try hard enough." She bit her lip and shook her head. "Again."

Kevin gave her a deeply sympathetic look, hollow, sleepless blue eyes full of complex and unspoken emotion. Wendy realized again just how much he had changed since the accident. His broad, comedian's face had gained a kind of grim maturity, and Wendy almost reached out and touched his hand. She was mortified to realize that she was beginning to feel an almost subconscious attraction towards him. It seemed like such a betrayal of everything she had been through, of both the painful ache of her love for Jason, still plaguing her like the tingling ghost sensation in an amputated limb, and of her cold determination to shut herself down and feel nothing.

"Wendy," he said, so earnest and utterly unaware of her inner turmoil. "You can't blame yourself for everything. You didn't even know they were in trouble until it was too late. It's not like you could have flown around the earth a bunch of times and turned back time like Superman. You couldn't have tried any harder than you did."

"I could have looked at the pictures earlier," Wendy said, feeling suddenly defensive. "That camera was sitting on my desk for two weeks and I didn't touch it. I didn't want to. I didn't want to bring back all the memories, and stuff. If I had, maybe..."

"Come on, Wendy," Kevin replied, impatiently shaking his head. "Don't be ridiculous. If you take this argument to its logical conclusion you'll be blaming yourself for not being born soon enough to stop Lee Harvey Oswald from assassinating President Kennedy. Snap out of it and let's concentrate on stuff we might be able to do something about. Now come on. Think. Who was behind Ashley and Ashlyn?"

Wendy looked away, sheepish. "Yeah, I guess you're right," she admitted, wrapping her arms around her body and looking out the window. "Uh, I think Frank was behind Ashley and Ashlyn. Remember? We were going to sit there, but he butted in ahead of us so he could..." She gave a little shudder of disgust, "You know... film them."

Kevin nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, right," he said. "Now I remember. That sleazy little jerk, making me sit in the back, when..."

"Hey," Wendy said. "Maybe you should thank him. If it goes like you said, then because we were in the last seat—according to your logic—that means we will be spared until last."

Kevin grimaced. "Great," he said. "So we get to live through the deaths of all the rest of our friends? And go to a bunch more funerals? I'd almost rather go first."

Wendy nodded, solemn. "I know what you mean," she said softly. "I don't think I can just keep going through all this again and again. It would kill me."

"Yeah, right." Kevin waved an impatient hand. "Okay, we're off track again. Who was behind Frank?"

"Um..."

"Oh, duh, fucking Lewis," Kevin said. "Right. He started giving you shit and I got into it with him, remember?"

"Right," Wendy replied. "Lewis. And behind him were Ian and Erin. Ian was in the fight too. That's why you all got thrown off."

"And behind the freaks was us," Kevin said. "The end of the road."

"Are you sure?" Wendy asked. "I could have sworn there was someone else..."

"I can't remember," Kevin said as they topped a hill. "But never mind that right now. Think about Frank. What does his picture look like?"

Wendy fished it out and held it up. Kevin looked over at it, trying to make out the details.

Suddenly, Wendy gasped and braced herself against the dashboard. The glove box latch that she had been playing around with abruptly let loose and dumped the contents of the glove box into Wendy's lap. CDs, dusty old sunglasses, fast food napkins, chopsticks, inkless pens, condoms and a mass of little black plastic ninjas spilled across her legs and onto the floorboard between her feet.

"Watch it," she shouted. "Kevin. Look out!"

Kevin looked back up. A tow truck driver had stepped out beside his truck, swinging his door out into traffic. Kevin jerked the wheel left and swerved around him, cursing. He looked in his rearview mirror. The guy was shaking his fist after Kevin as he wobbled his way toward a crappy, old, twenty-four foot rental truck that had broken down just past the crest of the hill.

"Dumb ass motherfucker," Kevin said.

"Sheesh," Wendy said. "That was close."

Kevin looked at Wendy and frowned. "Man," he said. "Ever since I read about Flight 180, all the things that happen to me, all the close calls, everything you don't even think twice about that happens every day, it all seems so weird now, so..." He shrugged. "I don't know... magnified. I feel like I'm going crazy sometimes, but it's like there's something after me."

"Just because you are paranoid," Wendy said, "doesn't mean they aren't out to get you."

Kevin smiled. "It's really great to be with you, Wendy," he said suddenly. "It's been making me nuts not being able to talk to anybody about... Well... all this."

"No problem," Wendy said, suddenly blushing, awareness of the reddening flush only making it worse.

"Let's see that picture again," Kevin said.

Wendy shook her head. "Look," she said. "Why don't we just look at them when we stop and eat." She smirked. "I'd prefer not to tempt fate again if it's all the same to you."

"You got it," Kevin said, smiling and gesturing with his chin towards an upcoming strip of fast food restaurants. "You want lobster or steak?"

Wendy smiled. "Just anywhere," she said. "I don't care. Some place with a drive thru, okay? I don't need people hearing about all this weirdness and everything else we're talking about."

Kevin gave her a sly sidelong glance. "Nice to see that everything that's happened hasn't made you any less of a control freak," he said.

Wendy smiled, but shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "There's just so much I don't seem to have any control of anymore. Why shouldn't I hold onto the stuff I do have control of as hard as I can?"

"Fair enough," he said, signaling to make a right turn into the first restaurant in the row. "Ze Butchie Burger for madame?"

Wendy giggled. "D'accord, Henri," she said. "And bring my Seven Up in a Lalique crystal flute."

Kevin angled through the parking lot, following the arrows to the drive thru. He pulled into the narrow drive through lane, and stopped behind a blond guy in a red Mustang convertible, who was leaning toward the microphone, giving his order. A couple in an SUV pulled in behind them. At the top of the hill, the tow truck driver began hooking the rental truck up with a heavy cable.

Wendy held a photo out to Kevin while they waited.

"Here's Frank's picture," she said.

Kevin took it and looked at it while Wendy peered over his shoulder. In the picture, Frank was balanced precariously on the Whacky Ladder, trying to climb to the top before he flipped over and

fell off. He looked scared. Behind him the prizes for the game were displayed. Big, stuffed teddy bears, Sponge Bob Squarepants dolls, cheap jewelry, beer can hats. Kevin tapped the picture.

"Well," he said. "It seems pretty obvious to me. He's going to fall off a ladder, right?"

"Hmmm," Wendy said. "It's a rope ladder. Maybe... maybe he's going to hang himself?"

"Ah, if only," Kevin said. "It'd be good riddance."

Wendy punched him in the arm. "Don't even joke like that, Kevin," she said. "I couldn't deal with another death right now—anybody's death. Not even a sleazebag like Frank Cheek."

The blond guy in the convertible pulled up to the pick up window, and a big truck turned into the parking lot and started toward the delivery area. Wendy noticed these facts on a peripheral level, but did not pay them any mind. She and Kevin were too absorbed in looking at Frank's picture for clues.

"Maybe the picture isn't literal," Wendy said. "Maybe the clue is in the prizes or something."

Kevin squinted at the picture. "What, you think Frank is going to be crushed by a... a giant Sponge Bob Squarepants?" He stopped and snapped his fingers. "Hey. Maybe he's going to drown. Sponge Bob lives under water, right?"

Wendy shook her head and closed her eyes. "It's so sad you know that," she said.

Kevin blushed and stammered. "Well, I mean, I've got younger brothers..." He trailed off. "Say, what are you, too intellectual for old Sponge Bob?"

"Come on, Kevin," Wendy said softly. "We're just getting silly now."

Kevin chewed his thumbnail, thinking. "Well," he said. "Remember, he won that cheesy mud flap girl necklace on the game, though. Aren't those girls usually on those plastic things that hang down by the tires on big eighteen-wheelers? Maybe he's going to get hit by a truck. Of course, I don't see the necklace in the picture, so it probably doesn't count, huh?"

"He hadn't won the necklace yet when I took that picture," Wendy said. "There has to be something else. What could it be? What are we missing?"

"Sorry," Kevin said. "I'm pretty much out of ideas. Do..." He peered at her intently. "Do you have any kind of... uh... 'feeling' about this picture? Like you did with the picture of Ashley and Ashlyn?"

"No," Wendy replied, shaking her head. "Well. I don't know. Maybe." She closed her eyes and pushed her bangs back off her forehead. "Everything is so creepy now and I don't want to read too much into every single thing."

A car horn blared. Kevin looked into the rearview mirror, annoyed. The driver of the SUV was waving him forward angrily. Kevin could see him mouthing Go, go. Kevin looked ahead, and noticed that the blond guy in the convertible mustang had pulled forward at last. He raised an apologetic hand to the guy in the SUV, then pulled forward to the microphone. He lowered his window. Behind him, the SUV driver pulled forward, pinning them in the lane. Beside them, the delivery truck driver, realizing he needed to back into the delivery area in order to off load correctly, started executing an awkward, cramped, three-point turn.

"Thank you for choosing Butchie Burger, home of the Big Butchie Belly Buster," said the nasal, apathetic voice from the speaker box. "May I take your order?"

Kevin looked at Wendy. "What are you going to have?" he asked.

Wendy looked at the menu board, distracted. The choices all seemed too complicated and intimidating, the idealized photos of the food all lurid and unnatural, unfathomable.

"Uh, just get me one of whatever you're having," she said. "My brain is about as deep fried as a Crispy Chicken Butchie Combo with fries."

"All right," Kevin said. "Butchie Burgers it is, and a Seven Up right? Though I am afraid Madame will be forced to slum it with ze paper go cup."

Wendy smiled, a small wan smile. She really wanted to feel better, but a bad, anxious feeling was mounting inside her and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of there.

As Kevin leaned out his window and gave his order, a small LCD sign below the speaker caught Wendy's attention. The blue glowing letters read, "This display helps ensure quality control of your order, and prompt service." Something about the sentence made her shiver, and not just the weird, awkward English as a second language syntax either. She looked at it again, and as she did, the word "control" flickered and went out. Wendy's heart thudded in her chest. How the hell had that happened? She looked at Kevin to say something, but when she looked back at the display, it was scrolling the details of their order, asking if it was correct.

She frowned. The chill she had felt when the word had faded to black wasn't going away. In fact it was getting stronger. It's back, she thought. The presence, the crystallized distillation of fear, the thing she had felt before the coaster crash and when she had looked at Ashley and Ashlyn's picture. It was back, but why? She hadn't gotten a strong feeling from Frank's picture, or any of the others they had looked at, and she and Kevin weren't next, were they? Was there anything dangerous around them?

She looked around. What was that beeping? The delivery truck was backing toward them, but there was a curb and a planted border between them. Suddenly, Kevin's radio came on, playing a rowdy hip-hop song. Wendy looked around, just as Kevin looked over his shoulder at her.

"Would you mind?" he said. "I can barely hear this bozo on the speaker."

"I didn't turn it on," said Wendy, her hands going clammy. "I thought you did."

Kevin gave her a mock stern look. "Come on, Wendy," he said. "I thought I was the prankster jackass in this relationship..."

She shook her head, eyes wide. "I swear, Kevin," she said. "I never touched it."

The beeping of the backing truck was getting very loud, even over the bleeped out swear words in the song on the radio. Wendy and Kevin both looked around. The back of the truck was coming straight for Wendy's door, and it didn't look like it was stopping. Wendy looked down. The back end of the truck stuck way out past the

wheels. She would be crushed two feet before the truck's wheels touched the curb.

"Fuck," she cried, then reached out through her open windows and banged on the back door of the truck.

"Hey!" Kevin bellowed. "Stop. You're too fucking close."

The truck slammed on its breaks and came to a stop, inches from Wendy's door. Wendy and Kevin breathed a sigh of relief.

The driver leaned out of his cab and looked back. He was a blond, nervous guy with a thin, bird-like frame and restless dark eyes behind thick glasses.

"Aw shit," he said, and hopped out of his cab. "Did I hit you? Sheesh, my boss'd have my butt for breakfast if I dinged up somebody's car. Lemme just..."

He trailed off and hurried to the back of the truck, shoulders hunched and apologetic beneath his stiff uniform shirt.

At the top of the hill, above and behind the Butchie Burger, the tow truck driver was winching up the broken down rental and pulling it tighter against the tow truck, while the man who had been driving the rental cursed and flapped his arms. The rental's front wheels were hooked over a high curb, and the cable connecting it to the tow truck strained. Then, without warning, the cable snapped, flying back and almost hitting the tow truck driver in the face. The rental truck banged down and started rolling forward, picking up speed as it started down the hill toward the Butchie Burger. The two men ran, chasing after it.

Kevin leaned across Wendy to give the thoughtless delivery truck driver a piece of his mind, but just as he did, the radio began flipping through stations, blipping over bits of speech and song between longer bursts of static. Wendy and Kevin stopped and looked at the radio, and then at each other.

"Please tell me there's a short in your wiring," said Wendy.

"It's a brand new system," he said, indicating the high tech, detachable faceplate of the fancy sound system. "An early graduation present from my dad." He squinted, looking more frightened than he probably wanted to admit. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Kevin," Wendy said, hesitant and anxious. "You know that... that feeling I've been talking about?"

The skinny delivery truck driver looked at the narrow space between the back of his truck and Wendy's door like it was a miraculous weeping statue of the Blessed Virgin. His eyes bugged out in amazement.

"Fuck, man. I'm sorry," he called. "That was close, huh?"

"No problem, dude," said Kevin, still looking alternately at the radio and at Wendy.

"The... uh... fear feeling?" he asked Wendy. "You mean like that night?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "I'm having it real bad right now."

The radio stopped on an oldies station. "Turn Around, Look At Me" by the Letterman was playing, its creepy, schmaltzy acoustic guitar march trickling out of the speaker.

"There is someone walking behind you."

Wendy shot a disbelieving glance at Kevin.

"Turn around," the song continued. "Look at me."

Wendy stared at the radio, frightened and confused. Was it trying to tell her something? Was there something behind her? She turned in her seat and looked out the back window of the pickup truck. Beyond the SUV that was parked behind them, Wendy could see, barreling down the hill, and aiming directly at them, the decrepit old rental truck, with the two guys chasing after it, but quickly falling behind.

"Oh... shit," she said, under her breath. "Shit, shit, shit!"

She suddenly snapped out of it and yanked furiously on her door handle.

"Get out!" she screamed. "We gotta get out of here right now."

Her door opened, but only two inches, before banging into the back of the delivery truck.

Kevin looked at her, and then looked around, searching for the danger.

"What?" he asked. "What is it?"

"Behind us," Wendy cried. "Look."

He glanced in the rearview mirror and did a double take. The rental truck glanced off a car parked in the street and veered, coming straight at them.

"Fuck," Kevin said.

He tried to open his door, but found that the cement microphone post blocked it. He slammed the door against the pole again in frustration, succeeding only in denting his door.

Wendy banged her door against the back of the truck again.

The truck driver, who was halfway back to his cab, turned around, angry.

"Hey," he called. "Watch it willya? I didn't hit you. You don't have to hit me."

"Move your truck," Wendy screamed. "Move it."

"Come on, goddamn it," Kevin hollered. "Hurry."

The guy gave them a put upon look. "There ain't no call to shout at me," he said. "I'm moving it. Take it easy, jeez."

He turned back to the cab, but seemed to be moving deliberately slowly, just to show her.

"Asshole," Kevin shouted, then leaned on the horn and waved at the blond guy ahead of them in the convertible Mustang, waving his hand out the window. "Go. Go, go, GO."

The Mustang's driver didn't even bother to look around, just stuck his fist up beside him and raised his middle finger in a curt, wordless fuck you.

"Fuck you, you fucker," Kevin yelled. "We're gonna get hit. Move your car."

Wendy tried the other direction, leaning out her window and waving furiously at the man and woman in the SUV behind them.

"Back up. Please back up. Hurry," she called.

The couple were in the middle of an argument and appeared to be way too involved to notice anything around them.

Kevin checked the rearview mirror again. The rental truck was twenty feet from the Butchie Burger parking lot and still gaining speed. He looked at the front window, then reached across to Wendy and pulled her down in her seat.

"Get down," he cried. "And watch your eyes."

He slouched down in his seat and put the bottoms of his brand new dress shoes on the inside of the windshield, then pressed as hard as he could. The glass creaked and groaned with the strain. Wendy covered her eyes and tensed. Kevin kicked, and then kicked again. The glass cracked. He kicked again. Another crack.

Behind them, the driverless rental truck bumped over the curb, bounced over a planted border, and careened through the parking lot, still aimed straight and true, almost like it was steering itself right for them.

Kevin kicked again, with all his might, and at last the safety glass shattered and crumbled into tiny cubes that showered him and Wendy in raw diamond glitter.

"Come on!" he said, gripping Wendy's hand.

Together they started climbing through the shattered front window.

The noise of the breaking glass was finally enough to catch the SUV driver's attention, and looking for the source of the sound, he checked his rearview mirror and saw the runaway rental truck racing toward him—filling the mirror. With a panicked curse, he threw his SUV into reverse, cranked the wheel, and, with a squealing of smoking tires, swerved backwards out of the way.

Kevin looked up as he hauled Wendy out onto the hood of his pickup and to her feet. She followed his gaze and saw that the rental truck was roaring into the drive through lane, blasting past the SUV, which had just rocked to a stop barely two feet to the left. There was less than a second to act.

"Jump!" Kevin commanded, and the two of them dived for the parking lot. The force of their leap dented the hood and caused the hood lock to disengage. The hood popped open as Kevin and Wendy ate pavement and rolled over to look back.

The rental truck plowed into the back of Kevin's pickup, slamming it forward to bulldoze into the red Mustang convertible. The hood of Kevin's pickup flew up with the force of the impact, but though the pickup's forward motion stopped, the inertia of the engine block kept it moving forward, ripping through the grill of the truck. With a metallic snap, the cooling fan broke off and flew forward, still spinning like a buzz saw.

The driver of the Mustang convertible banged his head on the steering wheel, smashing his glasses and bloodying his forehead. Then his head whiplashed viciously back. The whirling cooling fan chopped into the back of his neck like a flying guillotine, cleanly decapitating him. The inside of his windshield was instantly covered with a violent fountain of blood.

With a shriek of horror and revulsion, Wendy turned to bury her face against Kevin's chest as she and Kevin were spattered with flecks of gore and cubes of glass. Bits and pieces of both Kevin's pick-up and the convertible Mustang bounced and clattered around them. They found themselves kneeling on the tarmac, clinging desperately to one another, eyes shut tight.

"Don't look," Kevin said, cupping his palm around the back of her head and pressing her face into the lapel of his blood spattered jacket. "Don't look."

Around and above them, people were running out of the Butchie Burger, screaming and shouting, and making calls on their cellphones. The delivery truck driver was stepping out of his cab again, staring in shock. The couple in the SUV gaped, amazed at how close they had come to dying. The woman had taken a sleepy toddler from a baby seat in the back and was clutching the child as if trying to reassure herself that he was okay.

"Horrible," Wendy whispered, breathless and faint as she looked up at Kevin. "It's horrible."

"Was..." Kevin swallowed, fighting to force out the words. "Was that meant for us? Did we escape it?" He shot an anxious glance at the headless corpse slumped in the convertible Mustang, and jerked his eyes away again, sickened. "Did that poor guy take our place?"

Wendy shuddered. "Oh no," she said. "That can't be. That just makes it worse. I couldn't live with anybody dying in my place. He probably has a family..."

Kevin smoothed her hair and picked a bloody cube of safety glass from her bangs.

"Hey, hey," he said. "Forget it. Forget I said anything. Maybe it has nothing to do with the roller coaster crash. That's supposed to go in order, right? And we were last. So unless the 'going in order' part is

totally wrong, it wasn't meant for us. Maybe it really was just an accident."

"Maybe," Wendy replied. She pulled away from Kevin, wiping her face and her eyes. "But I could have sworn I felt the thing. The presence. I..."

She put her hand down in an attempt to steady herself so she could stand, and her palm came down on a piece of metal. She looked down. It was a shiny chrome silhouette of a pin-up girl on a chain. She stared at it, pulling back in horror.

"Kevin... Kevin, look..."

"Isn't that Frank's prize from the Whacky Ladder?" Kevin asked. "Where the hell did that come from? How did it..." He stopped as a sudden, terrible suspicion washed over his features. "No way." He looked to the convertible, starting to his feet. "No way."

Wendy looked up too. "No," she said. "No. No way. It's impossible. It can't be."

She stood too, and though it was almost impossible for her to approach the headless, blood-soaked figure in the convertible, she followed Kevin as he crept toward the crumpled Mustang. Hesitantly, they looked inside the twisted remains of the hot rod. Lying on the seat next to the body was a lumpy yellow, red and black thing. It was matted with blood and dented in on one side, and it reminded Wendy of a dirty, old soccer ball that Jason had given his dog to play with. The dog had bitten down hard and popped the ball in the first five minutes, and then spent the rest of the day carrying around the slobbery, lopsided, half deflated prize in her mouth. That's just what this thing looked like, except she knew it wasn't a dog's soccer ball, it was something else.

Wendy knew what it was, what it had to be, but her mind rejected it until she saw the skewed sunglasses still clinging to one side of the gruesome object. She was sure she was going to be sick, but now that she could see the face, her cold, dizzy nausea was eclipsed by a choking dread. It looked horribly familiar, but with the blood and the trauma, and swelling and everything, Wendy couldn't be sure. That bad bleach job on the thing's scraggly hair was wrong, but the dorky red bandana, those cheap broken sunglasses. Then, Kevin reached

out and touched one bent arm of the shattered sunglasses and they split and fell away, revealing the weasely, familiar face of Frank Cheek, a look of dull surprise in his glassy eyes.

"It is," Kevin said. "It's Frank."

"It's real," whispered Wendy, her hand over her mouth. "It's all true, Kevin."

Kevin nodded, swallowing thickly. "Frank was next, wasn't he?"

Wendy nodded.

"Then the order...?"

"It's real," Wendy repeated. "It's real."

# SIXTEEN

Officer Clark stood at the edge of the yellow crime scene tape, watching his partner Polanski taking a statement from the kid whose truck got creamed. Polanski was four years younger than Clark and painfully serious. Big and quiet, with bland, Polish features and a look of perpetual puzzlement, Dominik Polanski was the quintessential straight man. He was the sort of guy that never got the joke—that believed everything women told him and became a cop because he wanted to help people. Clark, on the other hand, became a cop for a much more practical reason. He did it to get laid.

It worked too. Women just loved that uniform. The idea that you're gonna protect them gets them all gooey and doe-eyed. Under the uniform, Jesse Clark was fit and tan, thick through the shoulders and everywhere else it counted. He had a face that women fell for, strong chin and a roguish smirk, and just a little hint of vulnerability in his green eyes. The kind of eyes that made them want to bake him cookies and kiss his boo boos. Unfortunately, Clark was well aware of this fact and had several batches of cookies baking all over town.

Truth be told, any woman would be much better off with Polanski, who wasn't much in the looks department, but was as simple and loyal as a dog, and would make a devoted husband if only someone would give him half a chance. Yet somehow that's just not how it worked out. The last time Clark had tried to hook Polanski up on a double date, his earnest young partner had gone home early because he had to give an insulin shot to his diabetic cat. You'd think chicks would be all over a guy who loved his poor old cat that much, but no dice. In the end it worked out just fine for Clark, who wound up taking both girls home for his own private double date.

Right there was a perfect example of what Clark was talking about. Polanski had finished up with the driver of the pickup, and was taking a tearful statement from a woman who had been sitting by the window inside the restaurant when the accident occurred. She was hot, no two ways about it, with curly red hair with a bleached blonde streak in the bangs, and probably red down below as well. Nice thick

legs, meaty and solid, with a big round ass, and cute little B-cups under a tight black T-shirt. Clark loved women who weren't afraid to eat and this girl was at the Butchie Burger, so clearly she was not the salad type. Her plump lower lip was quivering, big eyes brimming with tears as she pointed to the scattering of glass and metal where the accident had taken place. Obviously she needed a strong, official man to step in and comfort her, to make her feel safe, yet Polanski was just standing there, taking down notes, his body language as neutral as it had been when he was talking to the teenage kid. She covered her face with her hands, bursting into stifled sobs, and Polanski looked away from her with his pad in his hand, stiff and uncomfortable. Clark shook his head. The guy was hopeless.

There was still the teenage girl to talk to, but she really wasn't Clark's type. Little skinny underage waif, who looked like a strong wind would blow her right over. Clark never understood the appeal of younger girls. They were callow and self-centred, and thought they were hot shit just because they were fresh out of the wrapper. In Clark's experience, girls like that always required more work than they were worth. The input far exceeded the output every single time. Older chicks, on the other hand, were more hungry and willing to work harder to keep your attention.

Still, it never hurt to test the waters. Clark was never one to limit his options, and, girls aside, Clark did have a job to do here. This whole accident seemed fishy from the start, but the events that occurred, as unlikely as they might seem, all looked straight up from every angle. Chance. Nothing more. So why did Clark keep getting that strange feeling, like that time they found the severed hand in David Nearly's back yard? Something wasn't right. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it would not leave him alone.

Polanski was walking towards him, and Clark headed across the lot to meet his partner halfway.

"What's up, Dom?" Clark asked.

"Everyone's saying the same thing," the younger man said, checking back over his notes. "The cable on the tow rig snapped, causing the box truck to roll down the hill, through the lot and into the vehicles waiting in the drive through lane. Mr..." He turned the

page. "Mr Mitchell Pearson saw the truck rolling towards his vehicle and was able to take evasive steps to avoid collision. The two kids Kevin Fischer and Wendy Christensen were trapped inside their vehicle by a delivery truck that had backed up until it nearly touched the passenger side door. They were forced to break the windshield to escape."

"Look," Clark said. "I know all this. Did you get a statement from the delivery guy?"

Polanski nodded and flipped pages. The best thing about having Polanski as a partner was that he did almost all the scutwork without even being told. He actually seemed to like that kind of shit.

"It's my personal opinion that the delivery driver, Mr Eamon J Tinal, was in no way malicious or deliberate in blocking the passenger door of Fischer's truck," Polanski said. "He seems more shaken up by the accident than either of the two kids."

"Just an accident, then," Clark said, squinting at the crumpled remains of the Mustang. "Is that your assessment of the situation?"

"Yes it is," Polanski said, nodding. "Just an accident."

"Dom," Clark said, "just between you and me, doesn't it seem odd that the truck made it all the way down the hill and into this lot without getting hung up or hitting the curb or anything?"

"Odd, but not impossible," Polanski said. "You're not considering some kind of foul play, are you?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "It just doesn't... feel right."

"There is no way to control a driverless truck," Polanski said. "Even if the tow truck driver, or the guy Trayne who rented the truck in the first place, had wanted to use it to run down those kids, there would be absolutely no way to set up and execute the complex series of coincidences that took place here today."

Clark nodded, brow still creased. "Well," he said, "we'd better talk to the girl."

# SEVENTEEN

Wendy sat in the back door of an ambulance in the parking lot of the Butchie Burger. A paramedic was seeing to all the little cuts and bruises she had received from diving onto the tarmac, and from all the pieces of flying glass and car parts. It was early evening now and the lights of police cars, fire trucks and ambulances flashed off the shiny black and white checked façade of the restaurant and the windshields of the parked cars in the lot.

Brighter lights shone too, the harsh white lamps of a television news crew doing a stand up in front of the restaurant's trademark sign, a cheery anthropomorphic Boston Terrier with a chef's hat between his pointy ears and a huge, birthday cake-sized hamburger on a platter held high in one paw. She shivered as two more paramedics wheeled the bagged remains of Frank Cheek to another ambulance on a gurney. There was another, smaller plastic packet sitting on top of the standard size body bag. It could have been someone's forgotten lunch, but Wendy knew it was really Frank's head.

The woman who was picking glass out of Wendy's forearm looked up from her work when she felt the shiver traveling through Wendy's body. The paramedic was a tall blonde with a bad complexion and a thick, slightly dumpy build. Her expression was sympathetic, but serious.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know this doesn't feel so good, but you really need to try and hold still for me."

"Oh," said Wendy. "Right. Sorry."

Kevin crossed the parking lot, eyes scanning the crowd until he spotted Wendy. His bloody jacket was off and turned inside out, draped over one arm. The charcoal gray shirt beneath was open at the throat, and mostly clean, except for a spot or two around the collar. He had removed his tie and stuffed it into his pants pocket. The last few inches of the tie stuck out like a striped tongue. He had a taped-up gash on one cheek and a thicker bandage on his left wrist.

Like her, he was covered with scrapes and bruises. He frowned at her, both concerned and anxious.

"Uh, we need to..."

He gestured with his chin and eyes towards the drive marked OUT.

"Right, yes, we do," Wendy replied, nodding and pulling her arm away from the paramedic. "Look, I'm fine. I need to get home now."

"But miss..." the paramedic protested.

"Really," Wendy insisted. "I'm fine, honest. Thanks."

Two uniformed McKinley police officers stepped up behind Kevin. One was handsome and dark while the other was blond and plain.

"Miss Christensen?" the handsome one said. "I'm Officer Clark." He gestured to his partner. "This is Officer Polanski."

Wendy nodded. She considered asking if the blond cop was related to exiled director Roman Polanski, but figured he'd either be offended or have no idea who she was talking about.

"We just need to get a quick statement," Polanski said.

Wendy sighed and gave the two cops the short version, the version without the pictures or the cold, creepy feeling she'd had just before the crash. The paramedic took the opportunity to continue to work on Wendy's arm while she spoke. Polanski listened intently and took careful notes, but there was something in Clark's eyes that made Wendy think he could sense something wasn't kosher. That realization made her want to get as far away from him as possible. As good as it would be to have someone official on their side, she was not dumb enough or naïve enough to think that a cop would buy into their crazy theories about the crash and the connection to the accident at Red River Park.

"Well then," Polanski said. "We're all done. here, I guess."

"Can I give you a ride home?" Clark offered. "That truck is pretty much totaled."

Kevin gave Wendy a warning look and she got his message loud and clear. There was so much to talk about and Wendy couldn't help feeling a wave of paranoia. She didn't want to be around cops, or any adults for that matter.

"That's all right," she said. "We can walk to my house." She turned to Kevin. "I'll give you a ride back to your place from there, okay?"

"Isn't your car back at the cemetery?" Kevin asked.

"Nah," Wendy said, shaking her head. "My mom gave me and Julie a ride to the funeral."

Kevin nodded and turned to the police officers.

"Thanks anyway, guys," Kevin said. "We'll be okay. It's been pretty traumatic and all. We kinda need the walk to, you know, clear our heads."

Clark nodded. "Okay," he said. "If you're sure you'll be all right."

"Sure we're sure," Wendy said.

"Please keep in mind," Polanski said. "There are several new links on the McKinley PD website that will take you to various trauma counseling and support groups, if you feel any need for that sort of thing."

"Thanks," Kevin said, trying to sound sincere. "That's great. We... ah.. we really appreciate it."

"All right then," Clark said. "Take my card, in case you think of anything else that might be relevant to the accident."

He held the business card out to Wendy. "This is my private number," he told her. "Twenty four seven."

"Yeah, great," Kevin said, frowning as he intercepted the card and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Have a safe night," Clark said.

He and Polanski turned and headed back to their patrol car.

The paramedic touched Wendy's wrist with her gloved hand.

"Here," she said. "Just let me..."

The paramedic put a bandage on Wendy's arm and smoothed it gently down.

"Okay," she said. "You're all ready to go."

"Thanks," said Wendy. "I'll be okay."

Kevin helped her to her feet and they started across the parking lot toward the street.

"Will we be okay?" Wendy asked, looking suddenly into Kevin's eyes.

He hesitated, then nodded assertively. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, we're gonna be all right. We just gotta figure this thing out, is all."

Wendy pushed her bangs back off her forehead. "I really hope you're right," she said.

"Could you believe that sleazy cop coming on to you like that?" Kevin said. "This is my private number. What a scumbag."

"Whatever." Wendy shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"Sure it matters," Kevin said. "If he wasn't a cop I would have..."

"Hey, come on," Wendy said, heading him off before he got all pissed off and worked up into some sort of boy fit. "We have more important things to think about right now."

"Yeah," he said as they continued on, starting up the hill toward her subdivision. "Still..."

"What's really been bothering me about all this," she said, "is how... how vicious it all seems. How Frank..." She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "How he died. How Ashley and Ashlyn died—so brutal. It's not just like what we were talking about before, like death is some kind of accountant, just trying to balance the books. It's like Death is pissed off at us for escaping it the first time, and is punishing us for it now. Why couldn't Frank have died in his sleep? Why couldn't those girls have... have... I don't know, overdosed on Xanax or something?"

"Easy," Kevin said. "Easy. Let's back up. Let's try to get scientific about this. Besides being, well, vicious, what does Frank's death tell us?"

Wendy glanced up at him through her bangs. "You are so doing Mr Parkington from freshman social studies right now," she said.

Kevin chuckled. "Am I?" He looked away. "I guess maybe I am. Well, whatever. What was I saying?" He looked down at the sidewalk beneath their feet. "All right. Frank's death tells us two things, I think. One, the theory about the survivors of the crash dying in order seems to be correct. Frank was behind Ashley and Ashlyn on the coaster, and he died after them. Two, the theory about the photos predicting the way the deaths are going to happen isn't really paying off."

"Maybe," Wendy said. "I'm still not so sure about that..."

Kevin continued, cutting her off. "Come on," he said. "We were looking at Frank's picture right before he died. Him on the Whacky

ladder, right? Well, there was no rope involved in his death. No ladder. No plush toys. No SpongeBob Squarepants."

They turned the corner onto Wendy's quiet, well-groomed street.

"But I had such a strong feeling about the picture of Ashley and Ashlyn," she said. "I..."

She suddenly stopped, closed her eyes, head down, and turned away.

Kevin put a tentative hand on her arm. She could feel that he wanted to put his arms around her, but didn't. Wendy looked back up at him. They both stood stiffly apart and awkward.

"What?" Kevin asked. "What's wrong? Did you just think of something?"

Wendy shook her head. "No, no," she said. "Nothing. It just kinda hit me all of a sudden. Just... all of it, you know?" She sighed and continued walking, pulling away from Kevin's touch. "Sorry. I should have just left town right after the crash like I wanted to. It would have been better not to know all this."

"No," Kevin said with abrupt vehemence. "Never. That's a total cop out. It's never better staying ignorant. Wilful ignorance is just a deliberate surrender of control."

Wendy looked up at him. "Wilful ignorance is just a deliberate surrender of control, eh?" she smirked and looked away. "You hear that on one of those self-empowering video infomercials or something?"

Kevin frowned, looking genuinely stung. "Quit patronizing me, Wendy," he said. "You think I'm stupid just because I'm athletic, but you don't know anything about me. You have no idea what it's like to live with a father who calls you a fag if you use a word with more than two syllables, or a bunch of so-called friends who would put Cryogel in your jock if they ever found out that you actually like to read. You learn to keep your head down, to keep shit to yourself and only open up to people you trust. It's the only way to survive."

"I didn't know you like to read," Wendy said softly.

"You never asked, did you?" Kevin said. "You always just wrote me off as Jay's dumb jock friend. I'm not the total meathead that you think I am, Wendy."

"I don't think you're a meathead," Wendy said.

Before she realized what she was doing, she reached out and touched the prickly angle of his jaw, just beneath that three-inch gash held closed by a neat little row of transparent tape segments. He looked down at her with those hurt blue eyes and she knew that he was right. She had been treating him like a dumb jock. She had never really given him a chance. Jason had tried to tell her that there was more to Kevin than she imagined, that there was intelligence and depth beneath the dirty jokes and goofy slapstick routines, but she didn't believe him.

But thinking about Jason while stroking his best friend's warm, unshaven cheek, looking into those blue eyes and fighting to suppress the undeniable attraction she felt twisting and growing out of control inside her belly, filled her with hot, anxious conflict.

"Um..." he said, eyes cutting down and away. "We better..."

She pulled her hand away and clenched her fingers into a fist. "Okay," she replied.

Then suddenly they were in front of her house. She stood, half turned away from him.

"Can you just humor me and come in and look at the photos one more time?" she asked. "We can look at that one I didn't print out. It'll help us remember where everybody was sitting."

"Sure," Kevin replied, shrugging. "It couldn't hurt. Let's have a look."

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A few minutes later Wendy and Kevin sat in front of her computer in her room, clicking through the photos Wendy had taken on Red River grad night. It was kind of strange having Kevin there in her room, her inner sanctum, her own private little world. She had been dating Jason for three months before she had felt comfortable enough to invite him into her room. She had pulled up the padded white bench from her vanity to stand beside her sleek modern desk chair. Kevin sat awkwardly on the too-short bench, long legs bent

and knees up near his armpits as he watched the screen of Wendy's computer.

Wendy dragged the picture she had shot from the last car on the ride to the front of the open files. It wasn't very good. The attendant who had scolded her about her camera had put his arm up right as she took the photo. The wide plaid blur of his sleeve blocked the middle of the shot.

"Okay," she said. "Here's the one that shows the whole car. It sucks, but it's all we have to go on right now." She studied it carefully with Kevin frowning over her shoulder. "I'm pretty sure we got the seating order right before." She pointed to the screen. "There's Ashley and Ashlyn's little empty blonde heads, with Frank behind them, holding up his camera."

She pointed to the compact video camera held high above the row of heads. That bossy jerk attendant didn't say anything to Frank about his camera. She moved her finger to a single dark head in the next car back.

"Behind him is Lewis," Wendy continued, "and behind him are the gothsy twins Ian and Erin. See Erin's hair here." She pointed to a tangle of blue and black dreadlocks sticking up behind the attendant's hairy wrist. "And then us, right?"

Kevin leaned in closer, squinting at the screen. "Wait a minute. I think there's a couple of kids there in front of us, but the guy's arm is blocking them. I can't make out who they are. All I can see is a little slice of sweatshirt and an arm."

Wendy looked closer, squinting. "Weren't they thrown off?" Wendy asked. "Remember, they were just kids. They were too short and the attendant made them get off."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Kevin, leaning back and shifting his weight on the girly little bench. "I'm pretty sure those kids got tossed off before... Well... you know... Before your vision. Two more kids got on at the last minute."

"So maybe they stayed on and died in the crash," Wendy suggested, shrugging.

Kevin shook his head.

"No," he said. "Maybe you don't remember, but when me and Lewis started going at it, the guy who was running the ride opened cars seven through twelve. The train had two sections, one through six, and seven through twelve. All the seats in the back section were full and he made everyone get off."

Wendy frowned, concentrating hard. "Oookay," she said.

"Okay," Kevin continued, holding up six fingers. "So one more time. Ashley and Ashlyn were in seat seven." He put down one finger. "Frank was in seat eight, 'cause he took our original seat in order to try and film the girls."

"Right," said Wendy.

Kevin put down another finger.

"Lewis was in seat nine," he said, closing another finger. "Ian and Erin were in ten." Another finger went down. "And we were in the last seat. That's seat twelve, right?"

He closed his right hand into a fist, leaving only the single finger on his left hand remaining.

"So those two kids, whoever they are, were in seat eleven," he said, "which means they were kicked off the train with the rest of us. The second section went out empty."

"So who are they?" asked Wendy.

Kevin shrugged. "That's what I'm asking," he said. "Maybe we could ask Lewis if he remembers."

Wendy snorted derisively. "Yeah right," she said. "I don't think Lewis could remember what side of his body his ass was on."

"What is it with your prejudice against us jocks?" Kevin asked, suppressing a laugh.

"Kevin, please," Wendy said. "Lewis Romero is so dumb he thought 'Destiny' was Jason's new girlfriend."

Kevin smirked and shrugged. "Yeah, you're right," he said. "Lewis may be a hell of a fullback, but he won't be inventing a cure for cancer any time soon. But, hey, what about Ian and Erin? They may be weirdos but they aren't stupid. They might remember something."

"Well, whoever those kids were," Wendy said, "why haven't they come forward to talk to us? All the survivors seemed to gravitate

together out of some strange, post-traumatic physics, but only the ones we already know. Why not those two?"

"Hmmm," said Kevin, thinking. "I don't know. Maybe they weren't McKinley students at all. Maybe they were visiting from out of town or something and then went back after the accident." He gestured to the screen. "Whoever they are, I think it's more important to try to figure out who's going to be next. How it's going to happen and how we can stop it."

"Right," Wendy said, frowning at the arm blocking the two mystery passengers. She had no idea why that was bugging her so intensely. It was like she couldn't let it go. "But I don't remember anyone else dying in my vision." She closed her eyes, fighting to remember. "I remember Erin and Ian falling, being crushed against the ground." She squeezed her eyes closed even more tightly, nauseous. "Then..."

She opened her eyes and looked at Kevin. "Then you," she said softly.

Kevin put his hand on her shoulder. "Okay," he said. "It's okay."

"No it's not fucking okay," Wendy spat, hitting herself in the temple with a balled up fist. "Why can't I remember? Did I block it out somehow? Everything else is so clear." She paused and looked down. "Too clear."

"Don't beat yourself up about this, Wendy," Kevin said gently. "Right now we need to stay focused on figuring out who is next."

Wendy nodded. "You're right, I know," she said, fighting to calm herself, to focus on the task at hand. "Okay, Lewis was behind Frank, so it follows that he would be the next in line."

"Do you have any pictures of him?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, I think so." Wendy leaned forward and pushed the mouse around. "One of these..."

She clicked off the picture of the whole train and froze. She felt Kevin go stiff and tense beside her. The photo that had been revealed behind the one of the whole train was a picture of Carrie, smiling and looking saucy and happy, waving at the camera.

"Oh man," said Kevin quietly.

Wendy quickly clicked the picture closed and looked at him apologetically.

"Sorry," she said. "I should have taken that one out."

"No," Kevin replied with a terse shake of his head. "That's okay. Just... just kind of a shock for a second. Wasn't expecting it."

He was trying to be casual about it, but Wendy could see how hard it was for him, just like it was for her every time she saw a photo or even just something that reminded her of Jason.

"I know how you feel," Wendy said. "All these little reminders are like traps everywhere. Just when I think I've got it all under control I see some goofy commercial on TV that me and Jay used to make fun of together and I want to throw up. I guess that kind of thing is going to happen to us for the rest of our lives, huh?"

"Yeah," said Kevin, bitterly. "However long that is."

Wendy grimaced, a skittery chill running over the surface of her skin.

"Don't say that," she said. "I thought you said we were going to get through this."

"Yeah, we will," Kevin replied, distracted. "We will."

He looked off through Wendy's window, a million miles away. Wendy turned back to the screen when he spoke suddenly, words rushing out like a long held breath.

"I was going to ask Carrie to marry me," he said. "Just after graduation. Bought a ring and everything. I still have it. That ring. It was white gold, you know, because she hated the yellow kind. I keep it in the drawer next to my bed. I..." He choked up a little, then swallowed and continued. "I hate looking at it, but I can't just... get rid of it."

Wendy looked up at him, remembering that Carrie had told Wendy she was going to break up with Kevin after graduation, and feeling the guilty weight of that knowledge like a stone in her belly. Should she tell him? No. Kevin didn't need to know the truth, she decided. At least not right now.

"I..." she began, wanting to return the confidence, to share something painful of her own with him, but it was difficult to force the words. "I was going to... you know... have sex with Jason that night. We were going to spend the night at his place." She looked

away, face pulsing with liquid heat like lava beneath her skin. "It would have been my first time."

"Really?" Kevin said looking up at her. "Wow, he never mentioned it to me. I can't believe it. He had been dying to for so long, you know, I can't believe he didn't tell me." He laughed, a kind of defensive, uncomfortable little sound. "It's funny, but the last week before, well, what happened, I was really starting to feel kinda jealous of you."

"Jealous?" Wendy smiled. "Of me? Kevin, no offense but that sounds a little gay."

"No, I'm serious," said Kevin, his face so earnest that she couldn't bring herself to joke about it again. "I mean, Jay and I have been best friends since the first grade. He was like a brother. loser even. The summer before we started at McKinley, we cut our palms and made a blood brother pact that we would always stay together. No girls, no jobs, nothing would ever separate us."

He held up his meaty, calloused hand. There was the faint white line of a scar running across the thick place just below the thumb.

"Well, we were all set to go off to UNLV and everything, but in the last few days, Jay started acting all cagey about it. I could tell it was really about you, about being separated from you, but he wouldn't talk about it and I didn't want to push him. I was afraid that I was losing him. I saw what he had with you and, well, I guess that's part of what made me decide to ask Carrie to marry me. I felt like I needed to hold on to something. Saying it out loud now, it sounds so dumb."

He blushed, shoulders hunched down with awkward, self-conscious discomfort. Wendy felt suddenly terrible. She felt bad for Kevin, who had been about to lose his best friend and his girlfriend even before death took them away. And she felt bad for shortchanging her relationship with Jay, making light of it and acting like it was no big deal, when it had clearly been a very big deal to Jason. What was that old saying about 20/20 hindsight? Boy she was seeing way too clearly now.

"Kevin," Wendy said, but then trailed off. What could she possibly say in light of Kevin's revelations? "It's okay."

As soon as it was out of her mouth she cringed. What is it about seeing someone hurting that makes humans utter that meaningless and stupid phrase, like it was some primitive mojo to drive out pain and anguish. It's okay. He had said the same dumb thing to her and they both knew that things were about as far from okay as they could be.

"I wish it were okay," Kevin said, voice melancholy and defeated. "I really do. Sometimes I feel like nothing will ever be okay again."

"All we can do is try to figure this shit out," Wendy said, trying to sound stronger than she felt. "Find some way to stop it."

"You're right, I know," Kevin said. "Let's see the next picture."

She moved the mouse again and closed the picture of her sister giving her the finger with Perry in the background. Behind that was the photo Kevin had taken of Stacey Kobayashi's panties.

Kevin blushed and gave her a sheepish smile. "You can skip that one," he said.

Wendy moved to close it then stopped, a shiver running up her spine.

"Wait," she said. "Look."

She leaned forward, pointing behind the ruffled curve of Stacey's dress.

Kevin looked. There was someone walking by Stacey in the background, but the shot was taken from so low to the ground it was hard to make out people's faces. "Who's that?"

"Frank," she said. "It's Frank Cheek. And look..." Wendy pointed to the screen with a shaking finger.

Kevin looked where she was pointing. Frank was walking below the ceiling fans of the covered seating area, but in the picture, it looked like the fan was chopping through Frank's head. Kevin's eyes went wide.

"Oh my God," he breathed. "The pictures do tell how everybody's going to die. We were just looking at the wrong picture."

"I can't believe it," said Wendy. "I looked at this one earlier, more than once, and didn't think anything of it. It didn't look like anything, but now that we know how Frank died..." Wendy swallowed. "How awful."

She suddenly burst into helpless tears.

"I hate this," she said vehemently. "I don't want to know any more. There's nothing we can do to stop this insanity. All we can do is watch everyone die, one by one, until it's our turn. I don't want to die. I...."

The tears washed away her words and she put her face into her hands. All the tears she had kept inside came boiling out and she cried for Jason, for Carrie, for Kevin, for all of them, and for herself. It was too much for anyone to bear.

She felt Kevin's hand between her shoulder blades, a light, unsure touch. Unthinking, she flung herself blindly against him, half on the low bench and half in his lap. Sobbing, face pressed into his chest, she felt his bulky, muscular arms close around her.

She cried and cried, finally letting out the river of anguish she had kept dammed up inside her heart. She had no idea how long he held her, but slowly, eventually, her tormented sobs began to ease back, trickling away to nothing. She rested her cheek against the tear-damp fabric of his dress shirt and found herself suddenly intensely aware of being held by him, of his body against hers. His build was much thicker and broader than Jason's and his smell was so different, unique and unfamiliar: different soap, different fabric softener in his shirt, different cologne, different hair gel, and beneath it all a different body. Different sweat, different chemistry, as appealing and exciting as the smell of a brand new, never before tasted dish in an exotic restaurant.

She opened her eyes and focused on the fast pulse of blood in the soft spot above his clavicle. The small curve of his Adam's apple bobbed and tucked down as he swallowed hard and pulled in a sudden, shaky breath.

"Wendy," he said. She could feel his voice vibrating inside his chest, resonating in her cheekbone where it rested against him. "I swore to Jay that I would protect you and I meant it. I'm not gonna let him down, and I'm not gonna let anything happen to you no matter what. You hear me? No matter what." His voice cracked, rough with emotion. "Protecting you is all I have left."

She tilted her face up to his, meeting his intense blue gaze. His pupils were dilated, breathing tight and fast. She could feel herself melting against him, losing herself, losing control.

This is crazy, she thought.

But then they were kissing. She had no idea how it happened, it just happened, fierce and sudden, a terrible idea, but somehow as unavoidable as any of the other fatal collisions that were stacking up all around them. His mouth tasted torn and raw from the fall to the tarmac, like she knew her own must taste. She could feel the ravenous desire coiled in every inch of his powerful body, a desire that mirrored her own. Then suddenly he pulled away from her, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, his eyes bright with shame and confusion.

"I'm..." he stammered. "I'm sorry." He turned away, clenching his fist against his denim thigh. "Fuck. I don't know what the hell got into me." He started to stand. "I better go."

"No," Wendy said, quietly, her hand on his arm pulling him back down onto the little bench beside her. "Don't go. It's not your fault, Kevin." She let go of his arm and looked up into his face. "I guess whatever it was that got into you, well, it got into me too."

"I just..." Kevin said, unable to meet her eyes. "It's so strange. Everything's so strange now." He ran a shaky hand through his tousled hair. "I mean, I know Jay asked me to take care of you and all, but I really don't think this is what he meant."

Wendy burst out laughing, a rush of giddy relief spreading through her as Kevin shook his head and started laughing too.

"Probably not," she agreed.

"It's just that..." Kevin said. "I feel so close to you. You're like the only person on earth that I can relate to. I feel like I can be myself with you. No one else would ever understand what I'm going through."

"I know what you mean," Wendy said. "I've told you things I couldn't tell anyone else, because I know that you really know how I feel, you're not just saying you do to make me feel better."

"Fuck," Kevin said. "I felt so ashamed of having these kinds of feelings about you. Like I was... being unfaithful to Carrie's memory

just for thinking about it. I mean, I haven't even been able to..." He looked down, blushing thickly. "Well... you know... jerk off... since she died. Like it was, I don't know, disrespectful to her somehow."

Wendy looked at him with wide, incredulous eyes. "Really?" she asked. "Me neither. That's so weird, I felt exactly the same way."

Suddenly realizing what she had said, her fingers flew up to her lips, cheeks hot with mortified embarrassment.

"I can't believe I just said that," she whispered behind her fingers. "I've never talked about.... about that before. Not even with Jay."

Kevin smiled, a small curl in one corner of his mouth. "It is weird, isn't it?" he said. "There's all this bottled up guilt and confusion, and complicated feelings that don't even make any sense. The only thing that makes sense is being with you."

Wendy wanted desperately to put her hands on him, to kiss him again. Instead, she bit down on the inside of her cheek and turned away.

"Listen, Kevin," she said, taking in a long slow breath. "I feel the same way about being with you. Maybe it's just some kind of weird by-product of what we're going through, some psychological coping mechanism common in survivors of traumatic accidents, whatever, but I do know that there is no way I can handle being intimate with you right now."

Kevin looked so crushed that she immediately felt awful for being so blunt. Why did she have to push everyone away, to keep all her feelings distant and safe, just to maintain control at all costs? Isn't love by its very nature a loss of control? That's why they call it falling for someone. She took Kevin's hand.

"I'm not telling you to fuck off, Kevin," she said. "I'm just saying that we need to take care of other things first. Things are too scary right now. We've got to focus on finding a way to stop this insanity, to survive. Then, after this is all behind us..." She squeezed his thick calloused fingers. "Well then, we'll just take it as it comes. Okay?"

"Well," said Kevin, face solemn and jaw tightly clenched, "we better have a look at Lewis's picture then, huh?"

"Yeah," Wendy replied, "I'm almost afraid to look at it now. I don't want to see."

"I know," Kevin said. "But remember wilful ignorance..."

"...is just a deliberate surrender of control." Wendy finished. "I know, I know."

She closed the panty picture. Behind it was the picture of Lewis. Wendy gasped. Kevin hissed through his teeth. In the light of recent events it was frighteningly suggestive. Lewis was at the test of strength game. The picture had caught him at the end of his swing, just after the hammer had connected with the plank. His arms and head were down behind his shoulders, making him appear headless. Just above him, the weight was blurred as it rocketed up the rail toward the bell. But it could just as easily be seen as falling down towards him.

"My god," said Wendy. "He's going to get his head cut off too."

Kevin stabbed a finger at the screen. "And look at this." He tapped the picture. In the background was the Whirling Dervish ride, and the poster that advertised it, a cartoon of a Middle Eastern looking guy wearing a fez, swinging two scimitars. "Right now, Lewis is down at the State for football training camp. Getting ready for this fall."

"Uh-huh?" Wendy said, not getting it. "And...?"

"Man," Kevin said. "You mean Kevin the dumb jock actually knows something you don't?" He smirked. "State's team is called the Sultans."

"Oh," said Wendy in a small voice, so unnerved. by the further corroboration of the picture's oracular powers that she couldn't muster the energy to be offended. "We have to tell him. We have to show him the pictures."

Kevin hesitated, looking uncertain.

"You don't think we should?" Wendy asked. "You don't think he needs to know?"

"Yeah, he should know," he said at last. "I just... well, you know Lewis. You know how hard it is to tell him anything. He's a fucking knucklehead. He's not going to believe any of this shit."

"I think you're wrong, Kevin," Wendy said. "Remember how superstitious he is, how ready he was to believe that I had satanic powers. I think he'll be scared and I know he'll listen."

Kevin frowned, thoughtful. "I guess you're right." He looked up at Wendy. "You want to go down with me to State tomorrow? You're the scary satanic witch after all, he's more likely to listen to you."

"Why wait until tomorrow?" asked Wendy. "Why not call him right now?"

"It wouldn't work," Kevin said. "He's not gonna want to blow his chances to make the team, so a phone call isn't gonna cut it. He needs to see you and see the pictures to really put the fear of God into him."

"Okay, then we'll go together, first thing in the morning," Wendy said. "I'll pick you up."

"Cool." Kevin stood. "Well, I better get back home. My mom is probably worried sick by now and I know my dad's gonna lose it when he finds out about my truck."

"All right." She stood too, and grabbed a red corduroy jacket to throw on over her stained funeral clothes. She wanted to change out of the torn and bloody dress, but didn't feel comfortable changing with Kevin around, even if he went into the next room. She'd just have to wait till she got back. Wendy turned back to her desk and started shutting down the computer.

Kevin turned to the door, then stopped and turned back.

"Uh, are there pictures of you and me on there too?" he asked.

Wendy nodded. "Sure. Of course."

"Oh man," he said, grimacing. "I don't want to see mine."

Wendy raised an eyebrow. "What were you saying before about wilful ignorance?" she asked.

"Okay, so maybe I'm full of shit," he admitted. "You're going to hold me to some bullshit I made up in your driveway? I never thought I'd ever get a chance to see my own death before it happened. That is just too fucking freaky."

"I know," Wendy said. "I don't want to see mine either, but..."

"No, listen," Kevin said, suddenly serious. "All that wilful ignorance stuff aside. I don't think it'll be good for me to see mine just yet. If we're going to stop this and find a way to figure it out, I gotta be focused, you know. On the ball. If I see that picture I'll obsess about it constantly. I'll be all jumpy, seeing my doom coming

every time a bird flies overhead or some guy pulls up behind me in traffic." He rolled his shoulders, tense and anxious. "I don't want to know about it unless... unless I have to."

"You mean," Wendy said, "until you have to."

Wendy buttoned up her jacket and started for the door. As Kevin put his hand on the doorknob he stopped again, and looked at Wendy. She was right behind him and stopped just short of running into him. He looked down at her and she felt that niggling pull of attraction again, heat flushing her cheeks as she looked away. He put out a hand to touch her, but the hand froze, hanging uncertain in the air between them. He clenched it into a fist and then opened it again, looking down and pressing his lips together in a tight line. He opened the door and stepped aside, chivalrously motioning for her to go ahead.

"Wendy. I didn't hear you come in."

Wendy's mom stood at the far end of the hall. When she saw Kevin coming out of Wendy's room, a shadow of confusion crossed her face.

"Oh," Wendy's mother said. "I didn't know you had company."

They hadn't been doing anything wrong, but Wendy felt her blush deepen, followed by a rush of guilt as if she had been caught in the act.

"You remember Kevin, don't you?" Wendy stammered.

"You're Jason's friend, aren't you?" her mom asked, arching an eyebrow. "I saw you helping Ms Wise at the funeral."

"Yes, ma'am," Kevin said, looking as guilty as Wendy felt.

"I called your cellphone several times," Wendy's mom said, hurt accusation creeping into her voice. "You disappeared from the cemetery."

"Sorry mom," Wendy said. "I got a ride from Kevin."

Her blush was so hot and fierce now that you could fry an egg on her cheek. Everything she said just made it seem worse. Why was she feeling so guilty? They hadn't done anything.

But she knew why. It was because she wanted to and so did he, and that desire felt like a flashing neon sign above their heads.

"Well..." Wendy forced herself to breathe, to keep her voice level. "I better take Kevin home now."

Her mom frowned sharply. "I thought you said he gave you a ride," her mother said.

Shit. Wendy did not want to tell her mom about the accident at the Butchie Burger. She would panic and get hysterical as usual. Was it dim enough in the hallway to hide the stains on their dark clothes? What about the gash on Kevin's cheek? Wendy's mind was racing for some sort of excuse when Kevin spoke up.

"I had some engine trouble," Kevin said. "Luckily we were close enough to walk back here so Wendy could get her truck and give me a ride back home."

Wendy's mom looked skeptical, but seemed to accept Kevin's quick thinking explanation. If she noticed the taped up cut on his face, she didn't mention it.

"Okay then, honey," Wendy's mom said, coming forward to kiss Wendy's forehead. "But I still want you back here before curfew."

"Sure, mom," Wendy said, squirming anxiously away from her mother's affectionate gesture.

"It was nice to meet you, Mrs Christensen," Kevin said earnestly.

"You too, Kevin," Wendy's mom said indulgently. "Good luck with your car."

"Thank you, ma'am," Kevin replied.

"See you later, mom," Wendy said quickly, then dropping her voice, she turned to Kevin. "Let's go."

Once they were safely inside Wendy's truck they both burst out laughing.

"Man that was hilarious," Kevin said. "I swear, I've been flat out busted in way more embarrassing situations than that, but I've never felt so damn guilty."

"It didn't show," Wendy said. "You were totally cool and collected. I was the one acting like I had been caught with my pants down."

"What can I say," Kevin replied, smirking. "I've got the mom-wrangling skills down pat."

"Well," Wendy said, fastening her belt and sliding the key into the ignition. "You've obviously had way more practice getting caught in

sexual situations than I have."

Kevin paused with his belt halfway across his lap. "Is that what that was?" he asked softly. "A sexual situation?"

Wendy shook her head, put her truck in gear and pulled out of the drive. "I honestly have no idea, Kevin," she said.

They were mostly silent on the drive back, except for Kevin's occasional prompts to turn or go straight as he directed her through the sleepy suburban sprawl. Wendy had just turned onto his street when he spoke up.

"One more thing..." he said. "About my picture from that night."

"What about it?" Wendy asked.

"Can you tell... I mean..." he frowned. "Is it bad? Like painful? Or embarrassing? I mean, like, there's not gonna be anything jammed up my ass, right?"

Wendy rolled her eyes and let out a stifled laugh. "Isn't that just like a straight boy to be more worried about having something up his ass than about being dead." She smiled. "If you don't stop obsessing about that picture you'll have my foot up your ass. How's that?"

Kevin laughed too and then they were in front of his house. Wendy pulled over just past the driveway and put the truck in park, engine softly idling. Kevin turned to her, broad face underlit by the pale green light of the instrument panel.

"Okay then," he said.

"All right," she said.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a long endless minute. Then Kevin spoke with sudden, vehement conviction.

"We're gonna beat this thing, Wendy," he said. "We have to." He unhooked his safety belt and turned to face her. "I really felt alive tonight, for the first time since the accident. Thanks to you, I feel like I've turned a corner and broken out of that bleak, sludgy depression that had me all pent up with guilt and grief. I finally have a reason to keep on living and there is no way I'm gonna let some cranky accountant from beyond the grave fuck with that."

Wendy smiled. "I'll pick you up at nine am tomorrow," she said. "Okay?"

"Okay," Kevin replied.

Another endless stretch of silent seconds ticked by and then, unable to stop herself, Wendy pulled him close in an awkward embrace. He held her tight for a moment, then tilted her face up to his and kissed her. It was just a quick, closed mouth kiss, but it wanted to be more so badly she could almost taste it.

He moved away from her, shaking his head and smiling ruefully.

"Man," he said. "I don't know about you, but after all of this I'm gonna have to go upstairs, lock myself in my room for six hours and beat my meat like it owes me money. I'm seriously overdue."

Wendy covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. "Jeez, Kevin," she said. "Too much information. I did not need to know that."

"Well you started this," Kevin said.

"I started it?" Wendy replied with mock indignation. "You're the one who kissed me."

"You led me on," Kevin joked, gesturing to her conservative, knee length, black sheath dress. "Look how you're dressed."

"You're crazy," Wendy said, laughing.

"You like it," Kevin replied.

Wendy said nothing, just leaned her head into his warm shoulder. She did like it. He made her feel unreasonably optimistic, something she needed more than anything else in the face of all this madness. She needed to believe that he really could protect her, that they could beat this dark force that was conspiring against them. He stroked her hair and the length of her back for a few seconds, and gently pulled away.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

"9am," she replied.

She watched him climb out of her truck and walk away. As he turned down the driveway to his house, her mind went back to the photo she had taken of him that night at Red River. That overexposed, washed out, terrified-looking close up. She had no idea what hints or dark predictions it held, but she still felt a creeping sense of unease, deeper and more disturbing now that she was really starting to care for Kevin far more than she wanted to admit.

# EIGHTEEN

Kevin sat on the end of his bed. He was showered, shaved and dressed, but it was still only eight fifteen am. Kevin, who was always late, who always hit the snooze on his alarm two or three times too many, was sitting there ready to go, forty-five minutes before Wendy was supposed to pick him up. His belly was raw with anxiety and too much coffee, and the quiet house just set his nerves on edge. His mind was racing a mile a minute, complex emotions fighting like dogs inside his nauseous belly.

His dad had long since gone off to work and his mom was busy with the never-ending chores generated by a household containing four teenage boys. His youngest brother, thirteen year-old Ryan, had left for soccer camp the week before. Fifteen year-old Adam and sixteen year-old Hart were both still sleeping, but even if his entire family were awake and sitting right there beside Kevin, he knew that they could offer him no real comfort. They had not even been able to deal with Kevin's very normal grief over the loss of Carrie and Jason. There was no way they would be able to handle the increasingly sinister, inexplicable and, come on admit it, supernatural things that were piling up all around him. Kevin felt more alone than ever and found himself ridiculously eager to see Wendy.

He checked the time on the alarm clock on his bedside table and his eye was drawn to a framed picture of him and Carrie from last Halloween. He had been dressed as the Joker and she as Harley Quinn. She looked devastatingly sexy in her skin tight, black and red catsuit, and she was looking up at him with wide, adoring eyes like he was the only guy in the universe.

He turned away from the photo with a flush of guilt and caught the reflection of himself in the full-length mirror on the back of his door. Without even realizing it, he had put on his best shirt, a sleek blue button down that fit tight against his muscular frame and had short sleeves that showed off his brawny arms to their best advantage. It was the precise blue of his eyes and Carrie had loved it on him, saying it gave her bad thoughts. His mom had to sew the buttons

back on more than once when Carrie had ripped them off. Now Carrie was dead and he was the one having bad thoughts about his dead best friend's girlfriend.

Kevin hung his head, missing Carrie with a sudden intensity that felt like a kick to the stomach. She would have laughed at the absurdity of it all. She had never been the jealous type, mostly because of her unshakeable confidence that no one else could rock his world the way she could. She had been right too, but now she was gone, and he was more confused and conflicted with every passing minute. He reached for the drawer that held the ring he had bought for her. He started to open the drawer, then stopped, took a deep breath and slid it closed again. He felt like the lowest piece of shit on the planet.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said to Carrie's picture, not even entirely sure what he was apologizing for.

She did not respond, of course. He closed his eyes and covered them with his hand. He and Carrie had never had a perfect relationship. Far from it, they were always fighting, breaking up and getting back together. But he loved her, he really did. He knew that he could be a jerk sometimes, most of the time even, and he had been determined to treat her better, to make it up to her over the summer, to show her the kind of mature commitment he knew she longed for. But in his heart he had known that he was the one who needed to hang on to something that was already slipping into the past. The ring had been a foolish act of desperation, an attempt to cement what he knew was already irreparably damaged. He had been lying to himself, and the fact that she was dead couldn't change that bitter truth.

Just like he couldn't change his sudden, overpowering feelings for Wendy. It was really completely ridiculous. She wasn't anything like his type, so skinny and serious, and he would never have dreamed of touching her while Jay was alive. So why couldn't he get her out of his mind? Why did he find himself replaying that violent, hungry kiss over and over in his head? There was so much pent up passion inside her virginal body, and the thought of being the one to open her up and let it out was arousing beyond all reason. But that powerful

sexual attraction was only the tip of the iceberg. When she had leaned her head against his chest in her truck, Kevin had realized with sudden clarity that he would die to protect her. He had always thought that was some kind of over-wrought, soap opera bullshit, to say that you would die for someone, but holding Wendy and feeling her breathing against him, trusting him to take care of her, he knew in his heart that it was true.

They were up against some fucked up scary shit. Who knew what could happen next or how this madness was going to play out over the next twenty-four hours. Kevin only knew that they had to beat it. They had to find a way. If only they could make it down to State and warn Lewis in time, maybe the pattern would be broken and then Wendy would be safe.

Kevin looked back at the clock. 8:47pm. He sighed and stood, giving himself a critical once over in the mirror. He fussed with his hair and smoothed down his gut and then, realizing he was acting like he was going on a date, he dropped his hands to his sides, only to reach up and mess around with the hair over his forehead again a few seconds later, wondering if he needed a haircut. It was completely stupid. They had bigger things to worry about than Kevin's hair or his less than perfectly ripped abs.

Disgusted with himself, he pushed the door to his bedroom open and went down the stairs to wait out front for Wendy.

When her truck rounded the corner at precisely nine am, Kevin's heart burned rubber inside his chest. He waved, then looked down, embarrassed.

She pulled up and thumbed the automatic locks. He pulled the passenger door open and climbed inside. The clean interior of the cab smelled like her, a tart and delicate odor like a fresh cut apple and Kevin was assaulted with a fiercely visceral memory of holding her close the night before.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," she responded, big liquid brown eyes meeting his for only a fraction of a second, before looking away.

She shivered slightly and he wanted very badly to hug her, but her body language was distant and chilly, unwelcoming. Had he only

imagined that she wanted him? Was it just wishful thinking? She put the truck in gear and pulled away from the curb in silence.

The campus of the State University was about thirty minutes south of McKinley High—if you went the speed limit. Wendy, who drove ninety-five miles per hour with a cold intensity, precise and brutally aggressive, cutting off anyone who got in her way, made the trip in under fifteen minutes, with Kevin clinging to the door handles and gritting his teeth the whole way.

When they arrived, miraculously in one piece, Kevin directed her toward the back of the campus where the athletic buildings stood. They parked in the deserted lot of the stadium, The Home of the Sultans.

Wendy clutched Kevin's arm when they got out of her truck and looked up at the big billboard above the gates. It was a stylized logo of a swarthy, Sinbad looking guy, with a turban and a pointed beard above a pair of crossed scimitars. It almost looked as if the swords had chopped the sultan's head off.

The skittering dread in Kevin's belly was nearly drowned out by the feel of Wendy's strong fingers sliding over the soft spot inside his elbow. It was the first time she had touched him since the night before and this casual contact was intensely distracting.

She let go of his arm and dug through her bag, pulling out that sheaf of pictures. Sorting quickly through the pile, she found the one of Lewis at the Strongman game. She held it up to compare it with the big painting on the stadium wall.

"Those swords look almost exactly like the ones in Lewis's picture."

Kevin looked up, and checked out the picture.

"Yeah," he said, anxiety climbing. "Great."

"We better find him," she said.

He looked around the bustling sprawl, struggling to orient himself. "If I remember right," he gestured with his chin, "the team room is in the Brockman Building. This way. Come on."

They started toward a cluster of low two story buildings lining one side of a series of athletic practice fields. Football, baseball, soccer and lacrosse teams were out on the fields, practicing and running drills. Wendy and Kevin tried to spot Lewis's massive frame among

all the moving bodies, but couldn't find him. They came at last to the Brockman Building, a windowless brick bunker with glass doors at one end. Kevin pushed his way through the doors. Wendy followed him, and then paused, wrinkling her nose at the funky, old sock smell of a locker room, a stench that was intimately familiar to Kevin, but clearly new to her. He smiled a little and took her arm.

"Don't be scared, Wendy," he said. "I know the land of the Jock Tribe may seem strange and frightening to an outsider, but lucky for you, you have a trusty native guide. This way, miss."

There was an office to the left side, door propped open with a rubber stopper.

Kevin led Wendy into the office and then stepped up to the counter. Behind it, big middle-aged men in shorts and polo shirts were talking on phones and looking over rosters. One of them, a gray haired ex-jock with a hard, round paunch and a big walrus moustache, looked up over his bifocals. The plastic sign on his desk read "Mr Beeson."

"Help you?" he asked.

"Yes sir," said Kevin. "Uh, I'm looking for a guy named Lewis Romero. He's here at football camp. From McKinley."

Mr Beeson frowned. "Well, now," he said. "There's no visitors at the camp, you know. These kids are here to work."

Wendy seemed panicky and ready to lose it, but Kevin shot her a quick look, trying to psychically calm her, then returned his attention to Mr Beeson.

"Well sir," he said, trying desperately to think. "It's a family emergency. We tried to reach him on the phone, but couldn't. There's been an accident."

Mr Beeson still looked skeptical. "You don't look much like Romeros," he said. "Neither of you."

Wendy clenched her fists in palpable frustration, but Kevin soldiered on, unphased.

"I'm his team mate at McKinley, sir. Tight end." Wendy stifled a laugh at the phrase, "tight end," and Kevin kicked her under the counter. "Our team is closer than family."

The older man nodded. He was listening now. Kevin continued.

"Lewis's little brother George is a shoe in for quarterback in the fall. Well, George was hit by a car while riding his bike to his summer job this morning. It doesn't look good. They're afraid he'll never run again. The kid's conscious, but he's losing hope. He doesn't want to live if he can't play. See, their dad left them when they were kids. Lewis's mom and sisters are with him now, but he needs his big brother. George idolizes Lewis. Lewis is the only one that can snap him out of it, man to man, you know."

Mr Beeson nodded, thick white eyebrows drawn together. "Sure, yeah, of course," he said. "A boy needs his big brother in a situation like that, no doubt." He looked over at a white, dry erase board on the wall beside him. "The rookies are all over on the far end of field G, hitting the pads. That's back out the door and to the left. Last field you'll come to. Go see Majors, the assistant coach over there. He'll find your buddy for you."

"Thank you, sir," Kevin said.

He pushed away from the desk and spun to the door. Wendy followed silently.

"And tell that little brother to buck up and think positive," Mr Beeson called after them. "We all have setbacks, but that's no excuse to be a quitter."

"Yes, sir," said Kevin. "You bet."

"I didn't know Lewis had a little brother named George," Wendy said as they ran out the glass doors and started down the long sidewalk that ran along the fields.

"He doesn't," Kevin said.

"Man, you're good." Wendy said, shaking her head. "If it was just me alone, I'd be screwed. I don't speak a word of Jock."

"So you're finally acknowledging that my Jock background does have value?" Kevin asked, teasing.

"Maybe a little," she admitted with a shrug.

They continued down the walk for a few steps when Wendy turned to him with a frown.

"Wait a minute," she said. "George? George Romero? As in *Night of the Living Dead*?" She laughed. "You're lucky that old guy wasn't a horror movie fan."

Kevin shrugged. "What can I say?" he replied. "That was the first name that popped into my head." He paused. "I'm surprised you even know who George Romero is."

She turned away with a Mona Lisa smile. "You're not the only one with hidden depth," she said.

He laughed and then let it trail off when he saw her face go suddenly icy pale, eyes wide.

"What?" he asked, feeling a cold rush of adrenaline.

"Oh this is bad," she said. "This is bad."

"Bad?" asked Kevin. "What do you mean bad? Of course it's bad. Or do you mean badder than it already is?"

Wendy nodded, eyes bright and terrified. "Badder than it already is, yeah," she said. "It feels... it feels like it's already happening. Like right now. We have to hurry."

Kevin doubled his speed, breaking into a light run. Wendy, skinny though she was, seemed to be having no trouble keeping up with him.

A sign marked Field "G" came into view and beyond it, the field itself. Big burly guys in helmets, practice jerseys and shorts were taking turns charging tackling skids and driving them back with the strength of their legs and the power of their shoulders. Wendy and Kevin scanned the players on the field, looking for Lewis, but with their helmets on, it was hard to tell one jock from another.

The assistant coach, Mister Majors, a short, wiry black man in the uniform of white shorts, polo shirt and a white mesh golf hat, stood near the skids with a clip board and pen. He was shouting a lot, and occasionally blowing the whistle he wore around his neck. Wendy and Kevin jogged across the field toward him.

"That sucked, Neidoff," shouted Majors, as two linebackers ran back from the pads and returned to the back of the line. "My momma can hit harder than that, and she's eighty-two with a wooden leg. Try using that beef for something other than swinging your dick around."

"Excuse me?" Kevin said, stepping up to the older man's shoulder, not looking forward to this. "Coach Majors?"

Majors gave him a perfunctory glance, then turned his attention to the next pair of behemoths that were racing towards the skids.

"What do you want?" Majors snapped. "I'm in the middle of a practice here."

Behind him, Wendy kept craning her neck, trying to spot Lewis among the helmeted boys on the field. She was practically vibrating with anxiety and impatience.

"Sorry, sir," Kevin said, "but Mister Beeson said we should come talk to you. We're looking for Lewis Romero. There's been a family emergency."

"Who?" Majors asked. "Romero?" He spat into the balding grass at his feet. "That big dumb sack of shit is his own walking family emergency. Stupid idiot."

A chill shot through Kevin. Had something awful already happened? Were they too late?

"What do you mean, sir?" Kevin asked, trying to keep his voice cool. "He isn't here?"

"I sent him in to hit the weights until he could chill the fuck out," said Majors out of the side of his mouth. His eyes never left the field. "He got in Capino's face and started throwing punches. An attitude like that ain't gonna get him nowhere but junior college. He's not getting on my team if he doesn't get his head together, that's for sure."

"And where is the weight room, sir?" Kevin asked. "We need to find him right away."

"Stossen Building," Majors replied, pointing vaguely back the way they had come. "Round the back of the Brockman Building. Weight room is in the basement."

Wendy groaned. They had been right next to Lewis and run all this way in the wrong direction. Kevin could feel the tension coming off her in waves, her lower lip clenched tight between her teeth.

"Great," said Kevin, groaning inwardly. "Thank you, sir."

He turned and started trotting away across the field again.

Majors shouted after them. "And you tell Mister Romero that he is not leaving until he finishes his sets. I don't care who died."

"This is a nightmare," Wendy said, as they ran back down the walkway. "We're never going to find him."

"We'll find him," Kevin said. "I just hope we're not..."

"Don't say it," said Wendy, eyes wide. "Please."

They found the Stossen Building, across a small stretch of grass behind the Brockman Building, and banged, sweating and breathing hard, through the doors, then clattered down the steps to the basement. The basement hallway was long and painted a pale, institutional green, and smelled of gym clothes and rubber mats and muscle rub. Through a door to the left, they could see a group of bantamweight wrestlers practicing their moves. As they started down the hall, Kevin could hear Lewis's distinctive, ostentatious grunting, hissing and bellowing as he slung more weight than Kevin could pull with his truck. Wendy's face went white at the raw, animalistic sound.

"Oh my god," she said, speeding up. "We're too late. He's dying."

Kevin shook his head and put a hand on her shoulder, suppressing a smile. "He's fine," Kevin said. "He's just going heavy."

Wendy slowed and looked back at the weight room door. "Are you sure?" she asked, brows creased with anxiety. "It sounds awful."

"Sure I'm sure," Kevin said. "I've worked out with that rhino plenty of times. He could bench press your whole family."

Now that they seemed within reach of their goal, Kevin found himself reluctant to go through with it, suddenly uncomfortable and unsure.

"Man," he said. "He's gonna think we're both on crack. Coming in here all wild eyed and sweaty with these crazy sounding stories."

"He'll come around," Wendy said, pushing ahead of Kevin. "I thought you were on crack when you told me at first."

Kevin nodded and shrugged. He took in a deep breath and followed her as she pushed the doors open.

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Coach Majors had clearly had it out for Lewis from day one. The shrIMPY little fucker was trying to make up for his lack of size in the attitude department, and he had been all up in Lewis's face like a bitch with PMS from the second they met. So maybe Lewis was a little edgy. So what? It was no big deal. The jump from the short

cycles of oral Winstrol he'd been doing for the past year, up to his new, oil-based, injectable stack, was shredding him up like a motherfucker. It had piled muscle on top of muscle and was finally carving the gut he'd fought so hard to lose into a nice chunky six pack, but it had also kicked his temper into high gear.

Every little thing pissed him off and it seemed like he was getting into fights every time he turned around. Of course, pretty much everybody in the joint was on the juice, coaches included, so it's not like he was the only one. Steroids were a given in the sport and never mind all the bullshit about testing and fines and zero tolerance. So what the hell was Coach Majors's problem?

Lewis shrugged and slapped another set of plates on the leg press. That made twelve per side for a sick total of one thousand and eighty fucking pounds. If Coach Majors thought sending Lewis to the weight room was some kind of punishment, he was stupid on top of being an asshole. Lewis loved working out, loved pushing himself harder and harder, and seeing the immediate, eye-popping results as his steroid infused muscles grew more enormous every day. No one in the building could top Lewis, especially on legs, and as he sat down beneath the killer load on the leg press, he looked around the deserted weight room, disappointed to see that he was still alone. Too bad no one was there to witness this last set. Lewis loved making the wimpy little wrestlers and soccer players go crying home to mama with his unbeatable feats of strength. Shrugging, he cranked up the volume on his iPod, and with 50 Cent blasting in his ear buds, he placed both feet on the platform and popped off the lock that held the weights up above him.

With a massive grunt, he powered out the first couple of reps. His quads were on fire, screaming, and he strained against the platform, going real deep and letting out a louder wordless sound each time, until he was nearly hollering. The last five nearly killed him and when he finally got the last one up and slammed the lock in place, he thought for sure he was gonna puke. Slowly rolling onto his side and letting his shuddering legs down to the ground, he sat for a long minute, waiting for the nausea to pass. He did not see that the lock beneath him was not fully engaged. It held, but just barely. The

slightest touch would flip it up again and send one thousand and eighty pounds crashing down on the person in the seat. Lewis did not notice as he pulled himself to his feet, legs shaking so badly they could barely support his weight.

Bracing himself against the wall, just below a sign that read: "Your mother doesn't work here—RACK YOUR WEIGHTS WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED YOUR SET!" Lewis reached for his shaker cup of Muscle Milk, popped open the lid and took a swig. It was getting warm, but still tasted pretty damn good. Way better than those other brands of powdered protein drinks that he'd tried. It was almost like a real milkshake. He took a second swig and sneered at the sign. Lewis never racked his weights. For one thing, he was spent after a set like that and didn't feel like bothering, and for another, he wanted to make sure that the next person who came in saw the monstrous number of plates he had been using. He wanted them to feel like the punk ass bitches they were when they had to take off more than half of Lewis's weights before they could do their own little girly sets.

Turning away from the leg press, Lewis checked out his arms in the mirror and spontaneously decided to do a little extra triceps work. He was never satisfied with his triceps. They were stubborn and seemed to grow at half the speed of his biceps no matter how hard he blasted them. He closed the lid on the shaker cup and set it beside the bench, then picked up a pair of sixty-five pound dumbbells. He lay back and settled in for a quick set of skull crushers, bending his elbows and bringing the dumbbells down until they nearly touched his temples and up again. He had his iPod on shuffle and smiled when he heard the opening line of his latest favorite song, "Lose Control" by Missy Elliot with that bangin' hottie Ciara and Fat Man Scoop. He did not notice when his toe bumped against the shaker cup, knocking it over on its side. The thick, protein-rich liquid began to ooze out of the imperfectly closed lid, forming a slippery chocolate puddle on the tile floor.

Lewis let himself drift into the zone, pushing the weights to the beat of the song and thinking of all the things he'd like to do to Ciara. He wondered idly if he could get Veronica to come down and blow him or something. She would usually drop everything any time he

called, but she was visiting her grandmother in the hospital and might not be able to get away. Janina might be around, or maybe that white bitch he had been working on over the last weekend. He was gonna have to get something lined up, no doubt. The steroids weren't just making him edgy, they were making him horny as hell. He remembered one of the older guys had told him that there were always a couple of sluts hanging around the sidelines looking to get with athletes. He'd have to go see what was what as soon as he was done with this set.

A flash of movement caught his eye and he looked up to see the last person on earth he expected to be here.

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Wendy pushed open the weight room doors and stepped inside. It looked almost like some sort of medieval torture chamber, done over in dingy white cinderblock instead of crumbling stone. Strange chrome and black iron machines and implements rose up all over the room, all wheels and gears, cables and restraints, cuffs and hooks. She shivered. Everything in the room looked deadly. From somewhere towards the back came heavy, syncopated breathing and grunting. Other than that, the place was deserted.

"Come on," Kevin said, leading her through the maze of metal. "This way."

Lewis was lying back on a bench near the rear corner of the room. Tiny ear buds sat in his ears, trailing white wires to the iPod strapped to his upper arm. He was sweating and focused, his breathing labored but steady, deep into his set. Wendy would never have thought in a million years that she'd be so happy to see the big dumb jerk. She had to stifle an urge to throw her arms around him.

"Hey, Lewis," Kevin called, but they could hear the loud music coming from Lewis's earbuds from ten paces away. Clearly he couldn't hear them. "Lewis."

Kevin waved his arms, and finally caught Lewis's eye. Lewis sat up, frowning, heavy dumbbell in each hand.

"Fish," he said, standing up and swinging his leg over the bench. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Several things happened in such rapid succession that Wendy could barely follow the sequence of events. Lewis's foot slipped in the puddle of protein shake beside the bench. He staggered and dropped the dumbbells. One dumbbell fell directly in front of him, tripping him as he sought to regain his balance with his other foot and sending him sprawling forward, face first into the seat of the leg press. The other dumbbell fell beside him and rolled towards the side of the leg press, smacking heavily into the imperfectly engaged lock that held up the massive load of weight. The lock let go and one thousand and eighty pounds came slamming down like a falling safe in a cartoon, only it wasn't funny, not even a little bit.

Wendy sucked in a breathless little scream as Lewis's head burst like a water balloon, the violent impact sending up a hot spray of gore and sharp fragments of skull and teeth. Wendy and Kevin were utterly drenched from head to toe, bright red blood dripping down their noses, cheeks and fingers. Wendy stood in stunned silence for a handful of seconds, watching as Lewis's limbs twitched and beat against the floor and then went ominously still. Her eyes were drawn to the little display screen on the iPod strapped around his massive bicep.

"Lose Control," it read.

Blood was dripping in her eyes, blurring her vision, and Wendy crumpled to her knees, the world around her going hollow and dim. She rubbed furiously at her eyes, trying to clear them, but her eyelashes kept sticking together, like that time when she had pink eye as a little girl. There were clots, clots on her eyelashes. A huge wave of nausea hit and she vomited onto the bloody floor for what felt like hours and hours, until she was as empty and fragile as an eggshell. She curled in on herself, clutching her stomach and making little tiny noises that seemed like they were coming from somewhere else.

Someone was bothering her, pulling at her and badgering her about something and she turned her head away from the noise. She was so tired. She just wanted to close her eyes for a few seconds, but

the annoying person wouldn't stop. They kept on pulling her clothes and her wrists, forcing her to stand up, though her legs were weak as water.

"Wendy," the voice was saying. "Wendy, come on. We... we have to go."

"Go?" she said blankly, turning her head towards the voice. "Go where?"

"We have to get the hell out of here," the voice was saying, only there was a face now too, with intense blue eyes. "We have to warn Erin and Ian."

"Erin and Ian?"

Kevin. It was Kevin, Jay's friend. Why wouldn't he just leave her alone?

"Erin and Ian, remember?" he said. "They were in the car behind Lewis. They're next."

Wendy suddenly felt her sludgy stupor tear wide open like an amniotic sac, dumping her back into bright, awful reality. Lewis. Lewis, that jerk who made his girlfriend carry his stuffed animals and told Kevin he ought to control her. Lewis was dead, brutally killed because of her. All because of her. And it would never stop. Never, until she was dead too.

"It waited for us," she whispered, shaking her head. "It let us run around looking for Lewis just to fuck with us, but didn't kill him until we were here to watch him die. He could have slipped any time, but it waited. Don't you see, this thing we're up against, it's malicious. It doesn't just want to kill us, it wants to make us suffer. We can't fight something like that, something so... so evil."

"Wendy," Kevin said softly, but she cut him off.

"There's nothing we can do," she continued. "Nothing. It doesn't matter how hard we try. It doesn't matter how fast we run. It wins every time, don't you see? It's going to kill Erin and Ian and then it's going to kill us." Her voice got louder, throat tight with panic. "We... we're going to die, Kevin! We're going to DIE!"

She could feel the stiffening mask of blood on her face tightening the skin around her mouth, clotting and cracking as she spoke. The

sensation was peculiar and horrible, and she felt sure she was going to puke again.

"We're gonna die," she whispered, hugging herself and rocking back and forth. "We're gonna die. We're gonna die."

"Wendy." Kevin grasped her tightly by her shoulders. "Wendy stop it. Stop it! Snap out of it. You can't start thinking like that. If you start thinking like that, you might as well lie down and just wait for it to come."

She looked up at him. His face was streaked with drying blood like hers, blue eyes bright and burning.

"You can't give up on me now, Wendy," he said. "I'm not giving up on you. I'm not going to lie down and let it get you, Wendy. We gotta fight this thing together. There's gotta be some way we can stop it."

She wanted to believe him, more than she ever wanted anything in her life, but she still felt crushed beneath that cold, sleepy terror, like the narcotic, paralyzing fear of a rabbit pinned in the headlights of oncoming death.

"If we reach Erin and Ian in time," Kevin was saying, "we can show them the pictures and then maybe we can figure out what their death is supposed to be and make sure they don't go into that kind of situation. Then we can do the same for us."

Wendy tried to look back over at the dripping mess that was left of Lewis, but Kevin caught her face between his palms, tipping it up to look into her eyes.

"Come on," he said. "We have to get out of here and get cleaned up right now before the cops show up. We have to get back to McKinley and find Erin and Ian." He frowned. "Christ. I don't have either of their numbers. Do you?"

Wendy shook her head, unseeing.

"Okay," said Kevin. "We'll have to check when we get back." He looked up as he heard voices coming from the hall—a bunch of guys were laughing and joking, their voices getting closer.

"Shit. We gotta move." He looked around desperately, and spotted a door in the far wall. "Come on."

Kevin led Wendy quickly across the room and pushed the door open. She let him lead her, still feeling hollow and unreal, as if she

were watching herself on a movie screen. He looked up and down the length of the narrow hallway and judged it to be empty. He pulled Wendy into a row of lockers and started checking each one in turn.

"This is..." Wendy said, frowning. "This is a locker room."

"Right," Kevin said, distracted as he hunted up and down the row of lockers, trying each one.

"The boys' locker room," Wendy said. "I can't be in here."

Kevin let out a dry, mirthless laugh. "Getting caught in the boys locker room is really the least of your worries right now, Wendy," he said.

Kevin continued trying lockers. A lot of them were locked. A lot of them were empty, but at last he found what he was looking for. Someone had failed to push the hasp of their lock completely shut. Inside that locker, Kevin found two pairs of purple and gold State University sweat pants and sweat shirts, emblazoned with the ominous Sultan logo.

"We gotta get out of these bloody clothes," Kevin said, draping the sweats over the low bench and unbuttoning his shirt.

Wendy's gaze was drawn to the white V of his bare, clean chest as the bloody shirt fell away, but her brain still felt dull and sludgy and she looked away.

"Come on, Wendy," he was saying, pulling her to her feet. "Don't check out on me now. Come on."

She turned back to him and was horrified to see that he had stripped down to a pair of tight black boxer briefs.

"What...?"

"Take your clothes off," he said. "Hurry. There's no time for modesty."

She looked down at her gore stained hoody and tank top. Revulsion at the cold sticky feel of the bloody fabric against her skin won out over shyness and she peeled her clothes off, standing and shivering in her plain white bra and panties. She crossed her arms over her chest and hoped absurdly that Kevin couldn't tell how much of what was inside her bra was padding and how little was her.

"Come on, this way," he said, leading her to a nearby bathroom.

Wendy was too overwhelmed to be shocked as he led her past a row of urinals and into a tiled room with multiple showerheads and a drain in the center of the floor.

"You need to rinse your hair," he was saying as he cranked one of the faucets to the left, letting out a thick gush of rusty-smelling water.

She turned towards him in disbelief and saw that he was pulling off his underwear. She turned away, shielding her eyes and blushing fiercely, but it was too late. She had already seen way too much.

"Hurry up," Kevin said again, soaping up and ducking under the nozzle. "They're bound to have found Lewis by now."

"I can't," she said in a tiny voice, wrapping her arms tighter around her body and shivering, trying not to look at his wet, naked body and failing again.

"You don't have to take off your drawers," he said, raking his fingers through his hair and causing a fresh swirl of red to wash down towards the drain. "Just try and get the worst of it out of your hair."

She reached out to the faucet of the shower closest to her and turned it on. Stealing another glance at Kevin, she stuck her head beneath the spray.

The hot water soaked her bra and panties and sluiced through her hair. As she scrubbed her body she marveled at how difficult it was to get the blood to wash away. It had worked its way into every crevice, every delicate whorl of her fingertips. She used handfuls of the medicinal smelling liquid soap from the dispenser by the faucet, washing her body again and again until she started to feel almost normal.

Kevin suddenly grabbed her wrist, eyes wide. "Shit," he said. "Someone's coming."

Wendy heard echoing male voices getting closer and closer. She wrapped her arms back around her wet bra, eyes wide, but she was not even remotely prepared for what happened next.

Before she could think, Kevin lifted her off her feet, pressing her back against the tile. His hands cupped her ass, holding her up like she weighed nothing at all and she could feel the hot, naked press of

his wet body against hers. She was too shocked to resist when he pressed his mouth to hers, kissing her until she could barely breathe.

"Whoa, dude," said an unfamiliar voice. "Sorry man."

"Niiiiiiiice," said another with a lascivious chuckle.

She peeked over Kevin's shoulder and saw a group of six athletic and handsome boys standing in the shower doorway. They were mostly naked. Two had towels around their waists, but the rest just had the towels slung over their shoulders, making no effort to hide their private parts. Wendy pressed her face against Kevin's neck. She had seen more male nudity in the past five minutes than in the whole of the rest of her life. She was blushing like a house on fire.

"Come on, guys," Kevin said over his shoulder. "Do a bro a favor willya? Just give me ten more minutes, what do you say? I'm almost there."

"Sure," the first guy said.

"Lucky bastard," said the second.

"You're in my will," Kevin said, pulling Wendy closer and kissing her again.

She kissed him back, wrapping her legs around his waist, just for effect, of course. The boys all chuckled and turned to go.

Wendy totally lost track of how long Kevin was kissing her. The thin wet fabric of her panties felt like nothing between them, and he was rubbing against her in a way that made her feel like she was drowning. When he finally broke the kiss, he did not let her down. Just held her and looked into her eyes.

"They're gone," Wendy said.

"Uh-huh," Kevin said, still making no move to put her down.

"We better..." she began, but he was kissing her again and whatever smart, sensible thing she had been planning to say was washed away by that dark, drowning passion.

"Ok, ok," Kevin said, pulling back and breaking the kiss. "If I don't stop this now, I'm not gonna be able to stop and that's a really, really bad idea."

He let her gently back down on her bare feet and turned away, covering his obvious arousal with both hands.

"Do me a favor, okay?" he asked, looking back at her and then away, placing one palm against the tile to steady himself.

"What?" she asked. She hated how cold she felt now that their skins were no longer touching.

"Please," he said with a pained expression. "Please go put those sweats on. If you just keep standing there so... so... like that." He closed his eyes. "We're both gonna get arrested."

As she turned away, he cranked the hot water tap to off, standing under the cold spray.

"Jesus FUCK," he spluttered, stomping from foot to foot in the icy deluge. "Goddamn."

Wendy couldn't help but smile as she turned and headed back to the open locker.

Luckily the other boys were nowhere to be seen. Wendy scooped up the sweats that Kevin had found and while he remained cursing under the cold shower, she quickly skinned off her wet underthings and slipped into the sweat pants and shirt. The shirt hung down like a dress, the pants enormous, with the crotch just above her knees like some gangsta rapper. They were funky with some strange boy's sweat and made her wrinkle her nose in distaste.

Kevin came out of the shower with a frown, skin pink and goose bumped. He had obviously been cured of his inconvenient desire. She turned away as he toweled off and pulled on the other pair of sweats. On him the same size sweats were comically short and tight. He found a trashcan at the end of the row of lockers and pulled the plastic bin liner out of it. As Kevin started shoving their blood soaked clothing into the plastic bag, there was a clamor from the weight room, a chorus of horrified young men's voices. Agitated footsteps ran off and Wendy and Kevin heard the weight room door bang open.

"Come on," said Kevin. "We gotta go. Now!"

They heard running feet coming back toward the weight room and then the cranky voice of Mr Beeson rising above the babble of the teenagers' voices.

"Calm down. One at a time. One at a time." A pause, then: "Jesus H Christ!"

"I think there's another exit down at this end," Kevin said.

He led Wendy to the far locker room exit. As she stumbled along behind him, she wondered if it was possible to die from extremes of emotion. She had been rocketed from one extreme to the other, fear, hope, horror, revulsion, shame, desire and above all confusion, all in the last thirty minutes. Add in the weeks of grief and sadness and guilt, and her emotional core felt ready to snap like an overstretched rubber band. Plus there was no time to think, to get things under control, she just had to keep going, keep running. She followed Kevin through the far exit and found that it opened into the wrestling room. The sweat-slick grapplers looked up from their drills as Wendy and Kevin hurried across the mats to the hallway door. As they stepped out into the hallway and started for the stairs, they heard a voice call out behind them.

"You two. Stop."

Kevin glanced over his shoulder. It was Mr Beeson, followed by the six jocks Wendy had seen in the locker room.

Mr Beeson was pointing at them.

"You're the ones who were just looking for Romero."

"Dude," one of the other jocks said. "They were just screwing in the shower after they killed him."

"That's sick, dude."

"Run," said Kevin.

He shoved Wendy roughly up the stairs.

"Stop," cried Mr Beeson. "Stop!"

Kevin and Wendy banged out the double doors and zigzagged around several other buildings, sprinting across the campus for the football stadium parking lot. They seemed to have lost their pursuers, and managed to reach Wendy's truck unmolested.

Wendy leaned against it, gasping and wiping her forehead. She lifted her keys to the lock, but her hands were shaking so violently she couldn't punch the right button and kept locking the door instead of unlocking it. After a moment she let her hand drop and looked up at Kevin.

"I'm sorry. Can you drive?" she asked. "I'm still a little... shook up, you know?"

Kevin nodded, catching his breath. "Sure," he said. "No problem."

She tossed him her keys, walked around to the passenger side and got in.

Kevin was about to fire up the truck when he paused and looked over at her.

"Uh, the picture of me?" he asked. "I'm not, like, impaled by a steering column, or halfway out a shattered windshield or anything? Anything to do with a gearshift?"

Wendy turned to him, face blank. "How can you joke like that, after...?" She paused, looking away. "After what we just saw?"

Kevin looked chagrined. He started up the truck. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know that was rough, but if I don't joke about it I'll end up curled up in a little ball sucking my thumb, and that isn't going to help anybody."

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Wendy looked blankly out the side window, her forehead resting on the glass.

"It wanted us to see him die," she said again. "It waited until we got there because it wanted us to watch. Just like it waited until we got to the Butchie Burger before it snapped that cable and set the truck rolling toward Frank's Mustang. It made sure we were there and it used your truck to kill Frank. How can we fight something like that? How can we win against something that can control the whole universe?"

Kevin sighed. "I don't know, Wendy," he said. "I don't know, but we still have to try."

They rode in silence for a while, Kevin driving as fast as he could without drawing too much attention to himself. Then Wendy spoke again, her voice thick and listless.

"Did I do something to bring this on us?" she asked. "Is it my fault, somehow?"

"Don't, Wendy," Kevin said. "You can't blame yourself for all this."

"But then why me?" Wendy wailed. "All those people out there, all those people going to psychics and trying to know the future and what their destiny is going to be. I don't want to know. I didn't want to know! I just want it to stop. I want it never to have started." She punched the car door. "Why? Why is this happening?"

"I don't know why," Kevin said at last, "but you didn't do anything. This is just some kind of... I don't know, like a cosmic joke or something. I wish I could come up with a reason, even a good guess, to make you feel better, but I can't. I'm starting to think that there's no reason for it at all. It's just fate."

"So now you're saying there's nothing we can do?" Wendy asked.

"No," Kevin said. "That's not what I meant. I mean it's more like some sort of a weird natural phenomenon, like a tornado, and if we figure out some way to get down to the storm cellar and ride it out, maybe we can survive."

"A tornado?"

Kevin shrugged. "What do you want for spur of the moment?" he said. "You know what I mean."

Yeah," Wendy said, watching the highway stretching out ahead of them. "I guess I do." She sighed and shook her head. "I better see if I can find out where Ian and Erin are." She pulled her cellphone out of her bag. "Don't they work at Home Depot or something?"

"Really?" Kevin said, incredulous. "The gloom and doom twins sell potted plants and dry wall, and Ian being a McKinley with all that dough, too. Go figure. Well, those two never did like to be predictable."

# NINETEEN

Clark stepped into the funky, rank, sweat and unwashed jockstrap smell of the Stossen Building and wondered why in the hell this kid couldn't have gotten himself killed trying to steal panties in one of the sorority houses or peeping in the girls' locker room. There wasn't a skirt for miles. Just dumb, sweaty jocks and lots of them, all blubbering like a bunch of schoolgirls over the violent demise of their late teammate.

"This it?" Clark asked, nodding with his chin toward the closed door of the weight room.

An older, white haired guy, who had given his name as Mr Beeson, nodded and swallowed.

"That's right," he said.

Polanski nodded and stepped forward to push open the door. Clark figured he would let Polanski handle the stiff. He was more curious about the kids Mr Beeson said had been looking for the deceased just before the accident.

"All right then, Mr Beeson," Clark said.

"Burt," the older man said, rubbing a stained hankie over his lips. "Jesus this is awful."

"Okay, Burt," Clark continued, whipping out his leather covered note pad. "Can you describe the two kids who were looking for the deceased?"

"Well sure," Mr Beeson said. "The boy was decent looking, six one, maybe one seventy or one seventy five, blue eyes and dark hair. He said that he was a tight end on the McKinley High team." Mr Beeson closed his eyes, remembering. "Oh yeah, and he had a cut right here." He touched his left cheek.

Clark narrowed his eyes. Beeson was describing Kevin Fischer, the kid that had been driving the truck whose engine fan had decapitated Frank Cheek. He got that cut on his face diving out of the way of the moving truck.

"And you said there was a girl with him?" Clark prompted.

"That's right," Mr Beeson said. "Real nervous too. I'd put her at about five three, one oh five tops. She had dark hair too, long with some bangs in the front, but I don't think her eyes were blue. Brown maybe?"

Clark nodded. Clearly this was Wendy Christensen. This was getting weirder and weirder. What were the chances of those two kids being at the scene of two fatal accidents in as many days?

"They were looking for Romero," Mr Beeson said. "Then after... well... after it happened, I saw them again and they were wearing different clothes. I tried to talk to them, but they ran away."

This was not just weird, it was starting to sound like murder.

"Thank you very much for your help, Burt," Clark said, turning to enter the weight room.

"No problem," Mr Beeson said. "Do you mind if I...?" The older man gestured towards the stairs. "Some of my boys are a little shook up."

"That's fine," Clark said.

"Well then," Mr Beeson replied. "I'll be in the office if you need anything else." He paused. "You don't think... Well... some of the boys are saying those two murdered Lewis. You don't think that's true do you?"

"That's what we are trying to determine, sir," Polanski said, having just pushed the weight room door open. "Clark, can I see you in here for a moment?"

"Sure, you bet," Clark replied, following his younger partner into the weight room.

The smell was nearly overpowering, raw and fresh and coppery. Pretty soon that stink would start to ripen, become nastier and more complex, but for now it was just a harsh, butcher's shop smell with a sharp tang of fresh urine and bile. Clark wrinkled his nose and continued to follow Polanski through the maze of elderly gym equipment until they reached the stiff.

Big fucker, the dark skin of his shirtless, muscular back marred with virulent-looking 'roid acne. He lay face down, or more appropriately, belly down since there was pretty much nothing left of his face, or any other part of his head for that matter. The leg press

machine was loaded with an ungodly number of forty-five pound plates and the platform had slammed down on his head, squashing it like a bug.

"Talk to me," Clark said.

"Well," Polanski said. "There is a puddle of some kind of protein shake here on the floor with a very large skidding footprint in the center. The sole of the right shoe of the deceased is covered with this same liquid. I think it's fairly safe to say he slipped holding those two dumbbells. One tripped him and one hit the lock on the leg press."

"Another accident," Clark said, but something was chewing at him, niggling, some connection.

He turned, surveying the room. About eight feet away from the body was a small puddle of clear, yellow vomit. Around the vomit were smears and streaks of blood. Bloody footprints led away to the far locker room door.

"So who was here when it happened?" Clark asked.

Polanski shook his head. "No idea," he said. "As of yet I have been unable to locate anyone who was here at the time of the accident."

It was those two kids, Clark was sure of it. And while there was no way to prove that they caused Lewis Romero's death, any more than he could prove they had caused the death of Frank Cheek, something about their behavior was deeply suspicious. Why run? Why clean up and change clothes? Why, unless they did not want anyone to know they had been there? And then there was the whole decapitation theme. These were not just random accidents, but two people known to the kids had both died in such a way as to remove or destroy their heads. McKinley had been full of accidents lately. Never mind that nasty bit of business up at Red River Park.

Clark was not a detective or some thriller flick forensic genius. He was just a small town cop. He didn't have the chops for this kind of shit.

"Do you think we need to call in Valentine?" Polanski asked, voice low and almost awed at the prospect.

Clark shook his head. The last thing this case needed was Nick Valentine. The McKinley Police Department was unapologetically podunk, just under a dozen employees including dispatch and the

janitor. They had only one detective, a burnt out old son of a bitch named Nick Valentine, and he covered everything from robbery to vice and homicide. Valentine was fifty-one and looked a hundred, especially around the eyes. He had been a big guy once, but now he seemed shrunken inside clothes that always looked just a little too large. He chain-smoked generic cigarettes and chewed those super strong mints whenever he was not allowed to smoke. Clark always smelled him before he heard him, that sharp, minty stink, followed by his wet, tubercular cough echoing through the empty squad room. There was barely enough work to justify keeping him on the payroll, but he went way back with Chief Firebaugh in some mysterious and often speculated upon sort of way. Rumors varied, and Clark's favorite was that Valentine had incriminating photos of Firebaugh in some kind of kinky scenario that would hurt his chance for reelection. Clark had also heard that Valentine took private snoop jobs on the side to supplement his income and pay for his Altoids habit. In fact, Clark feared Valentine for that very reason. Clark had more than one married woman going at the moment, and he was always expecting to see Valentine outside his window with a camera.

"I really don't think we need to throw Valentine into the mix quite yet," Clark said, "but we really do need to talk to those two kids."

# TWENTY

Erin stood for a moment outside the massive iron gates that bordered the McKinley estate. Through the lacy green branches of ancient birch and maples, the faded gables of historic Riverview House were just visible, peeping through like an aging beauty hiding her flaws behind a delicate fan. Everyone in town knew the history of the McKinley family and their landmark estate.

The original McKinleys, brothers Garris and Galen, came over from Ireland just before the turn of the Nineteenth Century with barely a penny between them. Humble weavers with big dreams, they built one of the first textile mills in the United States. Garris was a genius with finances, wrangling investors and massaging the books, while clever Galen locked down several patents on innovative new machinery. They both married into money, Garris to railroad heiress Virginia Byles and younger Galen to legendary beauty Triphosia Dollerhide, daughter of a wealthy merchant. Within a few short years, they had completely taken over the tiny village of Beaversport and were two of the richest men in the state. Ten years and eight mills later, Beaversport had been officially renamed McKinley.

The brothers bought up acres and acres of land and built themselves twin mansions, Riverview House and Meadowview House. Several generations of McKinleys battled through the drama and infighting and scandals of any big wealthy family until finally Garris's branch of the family decided to sell off Meadowview House and its surrounding land to developers in 1921. Galen's branch, represented at that time by Ian's great grandfather Connor McKinley and his wife Beryl, were outraged and furious at this blatant disregard for roots and family history. However, eight years later when the stock market crashed and Connor lost almost everything, he saw that what had looked on the surface to be uncaring disrespect was really canny financial foresight that would have made old Garris proud.

Connor was forced to let all the servants go, shut down Riverview House and move Beryl and their three children Myrna, Desmond and

brand new baby, Ian's namesake grandfather, into the small guest cottage on the far end of the property. They weathered the lean years of the depression with nothing more than spit and determination, and came out the other side with big plans for the future. The elder Ian McKinley rebuilt the family fortune to a respectable size by the time he died, but never forgot those lean years. He instilled a militant work ethic in his own firstborn Troy, constantly railing against the dangers of relying on inherited money. Subsequently, Erin's boyfriend Ian suffered daily harangues about the dangers of becoming a lazy worthless playboy, an apparently unavoidable fate if his father ever gave him so much as a nickel for any reason whatsoever. Ian had been given a laughably meager allowance of ten dollars a week until he was fourteen, after which he was expected to get a job and earn his own keep, including paying a token "rent" for the carriage house in which he lived.

He was sent to the local public school rather than going off to private school with a bunch of rich mama's boys that wouldn't know hard work from a hole in the ground; just the sort to give young Ian all the wrong kind of values. To his father's endless dismay, Ian had developed his own independent set of values that had nothing to do with hard work or money. Ian could not have cared less about the McKinley fortune. He just wanted to be a writer, a starving poet living an edgy, counterculture lifestyle in some garret deep in the heart of a vibrant, diverse and happening city. He couldn't wait to get out of this town, away from his family and his name, and the two hundred years of expectation that threatened to crush him beneath its monumental weight.

When Erin first met Ian, that desire to move, to leave, to put this dull suburban prison far behind him was a large part of what seduced her, because that was her dream too.

She had been raised on the wrong side of town, the daughter of a single mother, an alcoholic artist who always made it painfully clear to Erin that having a daughter out of wedlock had destroyed her life. She railed that having Erin had trapped her in this mindless, soul-killing suburb, working shitty, low-paying jobs just to make ends meet. If only Erin had never been born, her mother could have gone

to New York City and made it big as an edgy, feminist comic artist. In truth, Erin suspected her mother was glad to have Erin as a scapegoat. That way she never had to really try and take the risk of failing. It wasn't her lack of talent holding her back, it was the baby, that broken condom, that one little mistake that fucked up everything.

Erin had always been a little chubby, smart as a whip, but socially inept, and consequently never fit in school. She had no real friends at all, so she lost herself in books, living a complex fantasy life full of dragons and magic. When puberty hit, her fantasies became darker, full of sensual vampires and corsets and bondage. She suffered the pain of schoolyard teasing and humiliation of being dumpy and uncool in the world of the skinny and the perfect. When it all became too much for her, she would take a razor to her arms and legs, slicing into her pale, delicate skin and relishing the sharper, more physical pain as it washed away the hurt inside her heart.

She was a freshman at McKinley when she met Ian, and the attraction between them was immediate and incendiary. He was the only other person in the school who had ever even heard of Lovecraft, *Vampire: The Masquerade* and Fields of the Nephilim, and he turned her on to the whole world of the Gothic subculture. He was viciously smart and brutally cynical, and he shared her contempt for the mindless blond drones all around them. She fell in love with his bony, milk white body, his thin, expressive hands and his intelligent, unforgiving gaze. He was not afraid to try the things that Erin had always dreamed of: ropes, and hairbrushes and knife play. He was a willing and endlessly creative partner in the elaborate, vampire role-playing scenarios she invented. Giving herself over to him completely was addictively delicious, better than she ever could have known. And he wanted to take her away from this deadbeat burg. He was everything Erin ever wanted in a lover, and more. She was sure that she had found her soul mate. At first...

Four years later, all the weaknesses, all the insecurities, everything he kept hidden beneath the witty, cynical facade was becoming clearer and clearer. She enjoyed being dominated by him in bed, but he insisted on bringing that level of control into their daily life,

always critical of her choices and always insisting that things be done his way or not at all. At first she felt as if she deserved this kind of treatment. After all, he was so much more knowledgeable than her. Clearly he knew best and that was that. As she started to expand her own knowledge through various online Gothic communities, she started to see that he did not know everything about everything. She began to sense that this need to control her at all times sprang from a deep-seated insecurity. He wanted desperately to leave McKinley, but he was terrified that if Erin was exposed to a world of choices, of other Goths, she would have no reason to stay with him.

She really did love him, and she tried her best to reassure him of her love and devotion, but he made it so impossible sometimes. Then, when that freaky accident happened at Red River, Erin had realized that she did not want to live the rest of her life as Ian's little Gothic slave girl. Her brush with death made her see that she needed to live her own life, be her own woman. She began to make secret plans to move away to San Francisco alone in September, squirreling away money from her job at Home Land Hardware and chatting online with SF area Goths about the local scene. She had already had more than one online affair, including an ongoing romance with another girl, a tattoo artist named Viola November. As soon as this summer was over, she planned to take off, and spend a few weeks with Viola until she found a place. Then she would start a brand new life, far, far away from anything or anyone named McKinley.

As she stood there by the massive gate, she wondered when it would be best to break it to Ian. She could not afford to quit her job, and since she and Ian worked together at Home Land, she knew he would make her life hell if she tried to break it off before she was ready to leave town. Best to just tough it out until September.

The guard, a lecherous old troll, grinned suggestively at Erin and buzzed her through the gate. She walked slowly down the winding drive, towards the carriage house, scuffing her pointed boots in the dusty gravel. Riverview House loomed up behind the little structure, and Erin realized that she was going to miss that old grand dame with all her faded glory and guarded secrets, far more than she was going to miss Ian. They were technically not allowed inside

Riverview House, because the main wing had been restored into a historical museum before Ian was born. Its east and west wings had been sealed off until the funds for their restoration became available, but it had been ridiculously easy to sneak in.

The east wing in particular had captured Erin's imagination, especially lovely Triphosia's rooms, in which she was rumored to have gone slowly, inevitably mad. The decayed splendor and haunted melancholy of those vast empty rooms had been the ideal Gothic backdrop for their romantic roleplaying. Erin had lost her virginity inside Riverview House and she had felt the house's presence and precipitation in the ritual as strongly as Ian's or even her own. It was as if that intense and painful moment existed not as a unique event, but only as part of a larger continuum, a single bright bead on a glittering necklace of thousands of such moments, stretching back through the generations that had lived and loved, and died inside that house.

As she approached the carriage house, she wondered if she would be able to convince Ian to make another midnight visit to the east wing of Riverview House. Erin would not tell him, but what she really wanted was a chance to say goodbye to the house.

Ian had moved his things out of his parent's cottage and into the carriage house the year he and Erin met. Back then the carriage house was barely more than a tumbledown storage shed. Ian had transformed the place into his own little Gothic sanctuary. The lower floor was still nothing but decaying horse stalls and ancient rusting equipment, but the second story contained a pair of modest rooms that had once housed the grooms, along with their shared bath and tiny kitchen. The other half of the upstairs was a large open hayloft. Ian had transformed the two small rooms into his bedroom and office, and the hayloft became a cozy living space plastered with posters of *The Crow* and *Sisters of Mercy*, and art by Tim Bradstreet and Alan M Clark. Erin had done more than half the decorating, transforming the space with scraps of lace and velvet, painted doll heads and rusted hunks of unfathomable clockwork. She knew that she would miss this place too.

Knocking on the thick, wooden double doors, she heard the angry, German, jackhammer beat of Rammstein's "Feuer Frei" filtering down through the cracks. She sighed. If Ian was listening to Rammstein, that meant he was going to be in one of his moods. It wasn't until the quiet break in the middle of the song that he finally heard her fist against the door and came down to let her in.

"What's the matter, Zip?" she asked, touching the sharp angle of his jaw and then pushing back the hair from his frowning forehead. She could see nearly an inch of pale brown root beneath the coal black dye. He looked tired and drawn.

"Hey, Pip," he said, stepping aside to let her in. "I don't know, I just... I can't find my glasses and..."

She took his hand and led him back up the steps, into the black and red chaos of his little sanctuary, through the hayloft and back to his office. Sure enough, his glasses were on the desk, beneath a tented paperback. She picked them up and put them gently on his face. How could she leave him? Honestly she didn't know what he was going to do without her.

"You're still in your civvies," she said, gesturing to his torn black jeans and Alien Sex Fiend T-shirt. She, on the other hand, had already changed into her obligatory uniform of shame, the hated tan work pants and cheap green polo shirt with the Home Land Hardware logo on the left breast. Her jaunty apron and her badge, a laminated atrocity with a sullen, washed out photo, her name, department (Garden) and the perky question "How may I help you?" were buried in her backpack until the last possible minute.

"What if we just blow it off?" Ian said suddenly, looking off at nothing. "Let's just stay here together. I just can't face the world today. I don't want to look at anyone but you."

Erin took his face in her hands. "I know, Zip," she said softly. "But we need the money."

I need the money, she thought, and then felt a swift wave of guilt.

"You're right, I know," he said. "It's just, well, things have been so weird since... well... since the accident." He looked up into her eyes. "Don't you feel it? Something that just isn't right."

"Jeez," Erin said, sneering. "You sound as loony as that Wendy chick."

Ian shrugged and turned away. "I'll get dressed," he said.

# TWENTY-ONE

Wendy and Kevin crept uncertainly through the dimly-lit rows of gardening implements and construction supplies at the Home Land home improvement warehouse. Home Land was one of those giant, nationwide franchise joints that show up in small towns and put all the local hardware stores out of business.

The store's logo was a sort of humanoid creature with a house for a head, windows for eyes and a door for a mouth. It was holding a hammer and a measuring tape. Clearly it was meant to look friendly and helpful, but to Kevin it just looked creepy and sinister. The store had been closing up for the night when they got there, but Wendy had convinced the manager on duty that they needed to talk to Ian and Erin right away. He had waved them back to the lawn and garden section and forgotten about them the moment they were out of his sight.

The huge, ceiling-high steel shelves were crammed with plywood, sheet rock and every tool known to man, all looming over them like deadly traps as they wandered through the enormous, warehouse-style store, looking for signs of the two Goth kids. Rakes and chainsaws, axes and garden weasels, and screw drivers and hammers all glinted menacingly from the shadows. Wendy was anxious beside Kevin, glancing nervously around, and Kevin realized that they were surrounded by a thousand possible violent deaths. If there was a place where one could expect a horrific, accidental death, this was it.

As they turned a corner, they heard a strange, loud, compressed air sound from nearby. *FWWWT! FWWWT! FWWWT!* Then something squeaked up above, and with a flutter, a pigeon dropped to the floor in front of them. It twitched for a moment, then lay still, dead. Wendy and Kevin froze in their tracks, but nothing more happened.

"What the fuck was that?" Kevin whispered.

"I don't know," Wendy said.

They jumped as a tinny walkie-talkie crackled somewhere near by. Kevin recognized Erin's voice beneath the static.

"Hey, Zip," she said. "Cut those plywood orders yet?"

Ian's real world voice answered her electronic one, very close by.

"No, not yet, Pip," he replied. "Trayne's been all edgy and impossible since his girlfriend gave him the boot and he says he wants me to get rid of these pigeons first. Stupid rats with wings keep setting off the motion sensors."

Wendy and Kevin looked around the next shelf and saw Ian, his skinny body with its safety orange employee apron, green polo shirt and tan pants looking like it belonged to someone else, strangely incongruous beneath his narrow, white face, dyed black hair and heavy steel piercings. He was striking an action movie pose, looking up at the ceiling with a huge hydraulic nailgun held in both hands like some futuristic ray gun. He aimed and fired again.

*FWWWT! FWWWT! FWWWT!*

Another pigeon dropped, its wing bent at a strange and unnatural angle.

"They're coming out of the walls," Ian cried in mock terror. He fired again, convulsively squeezing off ten shots in a row. "Game over, man. Game over."

Nails clanged off the girders high above and tinkled down through the shelving. Kevin shook his head.

"Stay frosty, Hudson," Kevin said.

Wendy looked at Kevin as if he had lost his mind—clearly not a big *Aliens* fan.

Ian jumped at the sound of Kevin's voice and spun around, drawing down on Kevin and Wendy like a commando on street patrol in Faluja. Wendy and Kevin threw their hands up.

"Jesus Christ, Ian," Kevin said. "Don't shoot."

"You scared the shit out of me," Ian said. He relaxed his pose, lowering the nailgun. "What the hell are you two doing here? We're closed." He looked down at their clothes with a nasty sneer. "And what on earth are you wearing? Why are you dressed up like College football players?"

"We've got something to tell you," Wendy said. "It's about the crash. And what's happened since."

Ian made a disdainful face. "Oh please," he said. "Spare me more of your superstitious, anti-rational claptrap."

"You can decide that for yourself after we tell you," Kevin said. "Where's Erin? She should hear this too."

Ian sighed and pulled his walkie-talkie from the pocket of his apron. "Hey, Pip," he said into the mic. "Where are you?"

"The land of nuts and screws," Erin's voice said, jittery with static.

"That pretty much describes this whole town," Ian said.

Erin's laughter bubbled from the little speaker. "Aisle six," she said.

"I'm coming to you, with outland interlopers no less," Ian said. "They are here to tell us of their quaint native superstitions."

"Who?" Erin asked.

"You'll see," Ian said.

He pocketed the walkie-talkie, then stepped up into a Raymond Gofer Easi Order Picker forklift. Ignoring the safety harness that hung from the seat, he fired up the electric vehicle. He looked at Wendy and Kevin.

"Want a lift?" Ian asked.

Wendy and Kevin, both intensely sensitive to the possibilities of potential mechanical mayhem, shook their heads adamantly.

"No thanks," Wendy said. "That's okay. We'd rather walk."

"Well," Ian said as he put the forklift in gear and started down the aisle, "I hope you can keep up with my mighty four miles an hour."

They followed him through the cavernous space, waiting as the forklift made slow ponderous turns, until they at last found Erin, also wearing an orange apron and the bland, weirdly normal Home Land uniform, pushing an industrial size shopping cart piled high with random items. She put a box of three-eighths inch screws back onto a shelf of screws of various sizes.

"Look, Pip," said Ian, as he swung into the aisle. "Visitors."

Erin looked up. She raised a questioning eyebrow. "Well, well," she said. "If it isn't the popular kids, come to mock us in our wage slave shame. What do they want?"

"We want to tell you something about the crash," Wendy answered. "Something important."

Erin sighed and rolled her thickly lined eyes. "I'm sick to death of the stupid crash," she said. "If I never hear anything more about it

it'll be too soon."

"It might be too late if you don't hear about it," Kevin told her, feeling testy and trying not to let it show.

"All right, all right," Erin said. "But walk while we talk. We can't get out of here until I restock all the stupid shit our pinhead customers can't manage to return to the shelves themselves. I don't want to spend another minute more in my itchy polyester norm costume than I absolutely have to."

"All right," Wendy said.

Kevin could see her steeling herself for this difficult task as they began following Erin while she pushed the shopping cart down the aisle at a snail's pace. Ian moved slowly alongside them in the forklift.

"Well, the first thing you should know," Wendy continued, "is that Lewis... Lewis is dead."

"You mean Frank Cheek," said Ian. "It was all over the news this morning. Revolting. I thought you two were there?"

Wendy nodded. "We were," she said, "but that was yesterday afternoon. Lewis died this morning. He was lifting weights and he slipped and fell on one of the machines. His head..."

She stopped, shuddering with the memory and unable to finish.

"His head was crushed," said Kevin, completing her sentence for her. "We were there too. Close enough to get a fucking brain shower. Hence the change of clothes."

Erin and Ian stared at them, mouths agape and silent.

"Lewis is really dead?" Ian finally asked. "You're not just fucking with us?"

"He's really dead," Wendy said. "It'll be on the news tomorrow for sure."

Erin frowned, shaking her head so her dreadlocks quivered around her pale face.

"Holy shit," she said. "You guys are like the fucking twin angels of death. People keep on dying all around you."

Wendy turned white at this accusation. It was way too close to the fears she had expressed before, but Kevin shook his head, vehement.

"We don't think it has anything to do with us," he said. "At least not in that way. We were actually going to see Lewis to warn him that we thought he was in danger."

"Danger from what?" asked Ian. "You knew that he was going to slip? Don't tell me McKinley's own low rent Cassandra had another one of her mystical visions."

"Well no. I mean yes, kind of. Not a vision... Just..." Kevin sighed. "I guess we better start from the beginning."

"Kevin's theory," Wendy said, "is that everybody who got off the ride before it crashed was supposed to die that night. That somehow us getting off threw some sort of celestial accounting out of whack, and now something—Death, the universe, fate, whatever—is trying to balance the books by killing us all off one by one."

Ian and Erin stared at them.

"That is without a doubt the single stupidest thing I have ever heard," Ian said at last. "There is no such thing as fate. Death isn't some malevolent entity with a scythe and a book of names. The universe is just a series of random events. There is no order. It is only the deep-seated human desire to have reasons for everything, to assign blame and motive to accidents, that makes people think there's some grand scheme behind everything. You guys are thinking like medieval peasants."

Kevin resisted the urge to reach out and shake Ian and make him listen. Ian had gone into full lecture mode now and was not even remotely willing to listen to anything they had to say.

"Show them the pictures, Wendy," Kevin said through gritted teeth.

Wendy nodded and fished in her bag until she found the picture of Ashley and Ashlyn. She handed it to Ian, who held it with one hand while he drove with the other.

"Great," Ian sneered. "Two scoops of dick bait and a school of hungry dicks. What exactly is the significance of this supposed to be?"

He held the photo out to Erin, who looked at it with similar dismissive contempt.

"How did Ashley and Ashlyn die?" Wendy asked.

"They burned up in tanning beds," Erin replied. "A more fitting death for a pair of looks-obsessed fashion whores I truly can not imagine."

"Now look at the picture," Wendy said. "See, they look like they're on fire."

Erin rolled her eyes. "Oh, please," she said. "You have got to be kidding."

"Come on," Ian said. "They're just lit up by an off screen red light. Are you trying to tell me that somehow predicted their death? I'm sorry. I'm afraid you are just not overwhelming me with your application of the scientific method."

"Okay fine," Wendy said, snatching the picture back. "Laugh all you want, but I'm not done." She took another picture out of the pile, but held it close to her chest. "So, tell me. How did Frank Cheek die?"

"It was the cooling fan from Kevin's truck, right?" Erin said. "They said it broke loose when that moving truck rear ended Kevin's ride, and it flew out and chopped Frank's head off."

"Right," Wendy said. She handed the picture of Frank to Ian. "So, what does that look like to you?"

Ian pulled back, eyes wide. He curled his lip. "Well, isn't this charming," he said. "Surely it wasn't you who shot this piece of panty fetish pornography."

Kevin flushed. "I took that one," he said. "But that's not important."

"Your vulgarity exceeds even my expectations, Fischer," Ian said, arching a withering eyebrow. He passed the picture to Erin. "And exactly what are we supposed to gain from this bit of lowbrow sleaze?"

"You're totally missing the point," said Kevin. "Look behind the skirt. Who's behind the skirt?"

Erin peered closer, squinting. "Is that..." She touched the surface of the photo with one black fingernail. "Is it Frank?"

"That's right," Wendy replied. "And what's that right up above him?"

"A ceiling fan. It looks like... well..." Erin faltered as the truth started to slowly sink in. "Like it's chopping his head off."

"Give me that back," Ian snapped, reaching for the photo.

Erin passed the picture back to him and he examined it more closely. He frowned, as if troubled, but then tossed it back at Wendy.

"Random nonsense," he said. "It doesn't mean a thing. It could have been anyone in the background of that shot."

"That's the point," Kevin said, slow and deliberate. "It could have been anyone, but it wasn't. It was Frank. And now Frank is dead."

Ian made a skeptical face. "And I suppose you have a picture of Lewis too," he said. "A shot that is somehow suggestive of him getting his head crushed by weights? I can't even imagine what that would look like."

Wendy tucked the picture of Frank back in the pile and pulled out the one of Lewis, appearing headless with the weight blurring above him. She passed it to Ian. Ian stared at it for a long moment, and licked his lips. He passed the picture to Erin. She paled, kohl smudged eyes wide.

"Wow," she said quietly.

"You are not actually buying this bullshit, are you?" Ian said to Erin. "I mean, really, how do we even know whether or not these pictures are actually legit? You can fake pretty much anything with Photoshop these days."

Kevin's brows creased, baffled. "Why the hell would we bother to fake something like this?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Ian. "Maybe to give credibility to your new girlfriend's mystical vision?"

Kevin narrowed his eyes, coldly furious. "Wendy is not my girlfriend," he said through clenched teeth.

Ian shrugged, irritatingly casual. "Could have fooled me," he said. "And with poor sainted Jason less than a month in the ground." He made a mild, scolding tut tut sound with his tongue against his teeth. "You don't waste any time, Fischer, I'll give you that."

Kevin felt a red flush of rage and he cocked his fist back to let Ian have it, but Wendy grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

"Don't," she said. "This is not helping."

"Yeah," Erin said, stepping in front of Ian. "Come on, knock it off, Ian."

"Wendy," Kevin said, shaking off her grip and turning away, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. "Please tell me that I am not in Ian's photo, because I'll tell you, I'm about an inch away from killing this smug little fucker myself."

"All right," Ian said. "Look... Even if these photos are real, that doesn't make them magical oracles of future doom. I can see how, to a superstitious, under-educated mind, this series of pictures might seem to give an impression of prescience, but... but it's all bullshit. I bet if you gave me any random pictures of kids who had died, and then told me how they died, I bet I could find something in each picture that would seem to suggest some 'warning' from beyond. But it's all after the fact. It's like looking at a Rorschach inkblot after the psychologist has told you what to look for. You're going to see whatever you want to see whether it's really there or not."

"So," Erin said, uneasily, as she handed the picture back to Wendy. "Is there really a photo of Ian? Is there one of me too?"

"Yeah," Wendy said. "There is. It shows the two of you together, but it doesn't seem quite as obvious as the others. Still, it seems clear that something's going on."

She sorted through the stack of photos until she found the right one and then handed the picture to Erin. Erin looked down at it, silent, and Kevin looked over her shoulder. It showed her and Ian standing together at the shooting gallery counter. A row of pointed tan banners hung above them. In the foreground, Erin held a rifle in one hand, and was holding her other hand up before her face like a famous celebrity trying to avoid being photographed by paparazzi. Her glossy black fingernails reflected the flash of the camera, like glistening drops of crude oil. Ian was slightly behind her. His arms were also up, trying to block his face, but they were a little too high, forming an X just above his forehead. He looked more embarrassed than frightened.

Erin scowled, relieved that the photo wasn't scarier and clearly happy to be able to scoff again.

"So what?" she said, sarcastically. "This proves that I'm going to OD on nail polish? And Ian is going to die of acute embarrassment?"

She handed the photo to Ian. He looked relieved too, though he would probably never admit it. He laughed, a short, derisive snort.

"Okay," he said. "See, obviously your theory kind of runs out of steam on closer examination." He tapped the glossy surface of the photo. "I don't exactly see the specter of Death leaning over me and tapping me on the shoulder with his bony finger here."

Kevin glowered, annoyed at Ian's flippancy and still wanting very badly to knock some sense into him.

"Well, I don't know," Wendy said. "There's a gun in the picture. You don't see that as significant?"

"Do you own a gun?" Kevin asked. "Either of you?"

"Of course," Ian said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Bin Laden ain't got nothing on me. Don't you watch television? All us doom and gloom, gothy geek, trench coat Mafia types are armed to the teeth and ready to go on a wild school shooting spree at the drop of a hat."

"He's kidding," Erin said. "We both own several antique knives, but honestly, guns are just so... I don't know... so uncouth."

"How about any crazy relatives with guns?" Kevin asked. "Any neighbors with itchy trigger fingers?"

"The McKinley's don't have neighbors," Ian said. "And all my crazy relatives are long dead."

"I don't know any of my neighbors," Erin said. "Except Mr Snow, the old hippie, but he has a poster on his door that says 'Make Love Not War' so I'm guessing he's not much of a gun nut. A dirty old man maybe, but not a gun nut."

"Okay, fine," Kevin said, more annoyed than ever. "We're just trying to warn you. Just trying to save your lives. We thought, since you're both so smart, maybe you could help us figure out how to get out of this, how to stop it, but forget it. Me and Wendy have plenty of time. See, you guys come before us, so that means that until you're dead, we're safe."

"What do you mean, 'we're next?'" Ian asked, looking up sharply. "What kind of vindictive shit is that?"

Wendy looked over at Kevin, as if trying to decide whether to subject themselves to further ridicule by telling Erin and Ian the rest of the theory. He nodded in silent support.

At last Wendy sighed and spoke.

"So far," she said, "everybody who has died after the crash has died in the order they were seated in the roller coaster—in the order they would have died." She held up her fingers and started counting them off. "Ashley and Ashlyn in car seven. Frank Cheek in car eight. Lewis in nine." She looked up at Erin. "You and Ian were in car ten right? And then we were behind you in car twelve."

"The only people we can't account for are the two who were sitting between you and us, the ones in car eleven," Kevin said. "Wendy has a picture, but it's blocked and we can't tell who they are." He looked from Ian to Erin. "You two don't happen to remember who they were or what they looked like?"

"Wait a minute," said Ian derisively. "You're trying to tell us that everybody was supposed to die in this neat regimented order, just like they were seated on the ride? That is completely preposterous. Death is anything but orderly and crashes are by their nature chaotic and unpredictable. A person closer to the front could be mortally wounded, but survive a few painful minutes longer, while someone further back could be killed instantly. There is no 'order.' It's an accident, not a line at the ice cream truck." Ian frowned. "And what do you mean you can't remember the people sitting directly in front of you? How is that possible? Or were you just too busy making goo goo eyes at each other while your respective keepers were out of site and out of mind?"

Kevin had to turn his back on Ian and start a slow count to ten. It would feel so fucking good to beat the miserable little shit into a bloody pulp, to send him tumbling ass over end into a pile of hedge clippers, but that sudden violent fantasy made him shudder. What if Kevin was part of Ian's death? What if Ian was supposed to goad Kevin into shoving him and starting off the whole deadly chain reaction? Kevin let his breath out slowly. If that was the case then Death would just need to find another method. Kevin flat out refused to play that shit.

Oblivious to Kevin's inner conflict, Wendy sighed with annoyance and turned back to Erin.

"You don't remember either, huh?" she asked.

"Sorry," Erin replied, shrugging. "Not a clue. No wait," she cried suddenly. "Yes I do. Now I remember. It was this guy, with, like, a big black cloak with a pointed hood. And you couldn't see his face, only these two glowing red eyes. The attendant took away his sickle before the ride started."

"Okay," Wendy said, snatching back the picture of Erin and Ian. "Okay. Go ahead and laugh. You think I care if you think we're crazy? If it saves our lives, I don't care if the whole world thinks we're crazy. At least we're trying to do something about it. At least we're not just giving in to it."

"Giving in to 'it?'" Ian asked. "Into what? There is no 'it.' Death isn't a person. We just covered that."

"I don't know," Kevin said. "Maybe it's more like some kind of force."

Erin hefted a ten-pound bag of plant food out of the shopping cart and tossed it to Ian.

"Third shelf," she said.

Ian draped the bag over the rail and pushed a lever. The forklift platform began rising.

"A force is just... a force, like gravity or magnetism." Ian jogged the lift a bit to the left to get closer to the shelf. "It's only transferred energy. It has no consciousness, malicious or otherwise."

As Kevin watched Ian rising above them, a tiny wind chime tinkled gently beside him. He saw Wendy turn towards the colorful chimes, hanging from a sign offering them for sale at a discount, and he followed her gaze. The chimes were swaying slightly, though there was no breeze inside the store. He turned around to look first one way and then the other. There was a display of electric fans on sale nearby, but none of them were on or even plugged in. He turned back to Wendy and saw her shiver, face suddenly pale and lips pressed down into a tight line.

Ian continued his lecture as he positioned the lift next to the shelf.

"A force has no goals, no desires," he said. "It has no awareness that it is a force."

As he rose to the third shelf, he came near a line of garden flags and banners that were hung above him from the top of the shelf.

Several of the flags tapered to a point at the bottom. Wendy frowned at the flags and looked back down at the picture of Erin and Ian in her hands. Kevin looked over her shoulder at the photo. The flags looked a lot like the line of tan banners that ran above Ian's head in the picture, like a row of serrated teeth. What did it mean? Was Ian's death happening now?

"Kevin," she cried, pointing up. "These banners, they're in the picture."

Kevin looked up and saw Ian returning the bag of plant food to the third shelf, wedging it next to a stack of boxes. Each box was labeled "Muriatic Acid". The boxes rocked slightly. Kevin moved to pull Erin out of the way and shouted up at Ian. "Watch those boxes!"

Ian ducked reflexively and spun the forklift wheel. It reversed and swerved, and Ian was thrown away from the controls. Kevin pulled Erin out of the forklift's path. Ian grabbed the wheel again, trying to regain control, but before he could, the lift banged into the shelf on the opposite side of the aisle, knocking a bag of birdseed loose. It fell, exploding on the concrete floor as Wendy, Erin and Kevin leapt aside. Birdseed scattered and bounced everywhere.

Erin grimaced. "Oh great," she said. "Clean up on aisle seven."

Wendy and Kevin looked embarrassed.

"Sorry," Kevin said, shrugging.

Ian shouted down at them from the forklift.

"Fuck, man, what are you doing? You said the boxes were falling."

"I said 'watch those boxes,'" Kevin said. "They were... Well... they looked like they might..."

Ian shook his head, pissed off now. "They weren't doing anything," he spat. "Christ. You two are a couple of paranoid freaks."

Wendy put her hands on her hips. "We're not going to apologize for trying to save you," she said. "You haven't seen what we've seen. You haven't been through what we've been through." She looked around at the maze of potential death that was the Home Land home improvement warehouse and shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. "At least not yet."

"You don't have to apologize," Erin said, handing Wendy and Kevin push brooms from a nearby shelf. "You just have to clean it

up."

She pulled a trashcan and a dustpan out of the shopping cart and dropped them beside the bag of seed. Kevin and Wendy dutifully began sweeping all the birdseed into a pile and scooping it up with the dustpan, as Erin continued restocking the shelves. Ian began lowering the forklift.

"So tell me," Erin said, voice casual, but sounding just a little forced. "Who's next in this theory of yours? Me or Ian?"

Kevin paused in his sweeping. "Well..." he said, "we know the order that everybody was sitting on the roller coaster, but we don't have any idea how it works with two people who were sitting together."

Wendy looked up and nodded. "That's right," she said. "There's not really any way to tell whether Ashley or Ashlyn died first, and Frank and Lewis were both sitting alone."

Erin laughed, a sound that didn't seem to have much to do with mirth. "Who knew Death was so fucking complicated?" She pulled a large box labeled Sure-Gro out of the cart and hefted it to Ian. "Third shelf again, Zip."

Ian caught it and pushed the lever that raised the forklift.

"Death is not complicated," he said. "It's very simple. See, people die. End of story. That's how life works. One hundred and fifty thousand people a day, every goddamn day of the year. We are biological entities. Simply put, death is the end of biological function. There's nothing mysterious or complicated about it." He found the stack of Sure-Gro Boxes and started slipping the return into a gap in the stack. It hit the edge of a box in the second row back and got stuck. He pushed harder, trying to manhandle it into place.

Kevin craned his neck up to continue the argument. "Okay, maybe death is simple," he said, "but how can you 'simply' explain a premonition that caused us to get off a ride that then immediately killed all of its passengers in a catastrophic accident?"

"See, you're suffering from an illusion brought on by a..." Ian gave the box of Sure-Gro a final shove. It pushed the boxes behind it back, causing a four-pound box of three inch roofing nails, facing the aisle

on the other side of the shelf, to teeter precariously. "By a narrowness of focus. You're not looking at the big picture."

"What do you mean?" Wendy asked, clearly growing impatient with this snooty lecture.

"Okay, it's like this," Ian said. "Wendy had a 'premonition,' though I think we are safe in calling it a 'fear,' that the roller coaster was going to crash, and 'Whoa, dude,' it crashed. Amazing. Incredible. What you aren't thinking about is all those times the ride has run, and I'll bet that every single time, somebody on it thinks, 'Oh my god, we're going to crash,' but it doesn't. So, the one time out of the million times it has run that it actually crashes, you think it's an other worldly coincidence that you thought it was going to crash."

"But it was more than just a vague feeling," said Wendy defensively. "I saw the whole crash. I saw how it happened. I saw what caused it. I saw you die. I saw Erin die."

"You saw what caused it?" Erin asked. "What was it? What caused it?"

"Frank Cheek dropped his camera when we went through the loop," Wendy told her. "Then the train ran over it and jumped the track."

Ian barked out a laugh. He pounded the shelf with his fist as he started lowering the lift again.

"Oh, you're killing me," he said. "You're killing me. Do you hear yourself?"

On the far side of the shelf, in the next aisle, the heavy box of nails shook from the blow and tipped off the shelf. Below it was a forklift, abandoned at the end of the day in the middle of the job. A pallet sat on the forks, which were raised to the second shelf. The box of nails fell on the edge of the pallet and teetered there, then came to rest, halfway off.

"What?" Wendy asked. "What did I say?"

Beside her, Erin was carrying a stack of little boxes of screws to their place on the shelf. As she started to put them back, one slipped and fell to the ground, spilling screws across the floor of the aisle. She sighed and plucked a telescoping, magnetic nail retriever out of

its slot on the shelf and began sweeping it above the screws. They jumped up and stuck to its tip.

Ian managed to recover himself from his overwhelming mirth. "You said Frank Cheek dropped his camera and caused the crash," he said. "Don't you see why that means that your 'vision' is a total lie? Frank Cheek wasn't on the roller coaster when it crashed, right? So he couldn't have caused the crash. It invalidates the entire premonition."

Wendy and Kevin paused and looked at each other. Neither of them had thought of that. It seemed to make sense.

"But..." Wendy said, desperate now. "But everything else is coming true. It did crash. And everybody who got off is dying, in order."

"Except for the two people you can't account for," Ian replied. "And a bunch of other exceptions."

Erin pulled the screws off the magnetic retriever, letting them drop into their box, then shoved the retriever back into its tube, but with a little too much force. The magnetic tip came to rest on the far side of the shelf near some spindled spools of metal chains.

"I'm done here, Zip," she said. "Finish cutting that order so we can get out of here already. Not that I'm not enjoying the evening's entertainment."

"Rightie oh, Pip," Ian replied.

Erin turned to Wendy and Kevin, who were just finishing dumping the last of the birdseed into the trashcan.

"Come on, you two," she said. "We'll have to let you out."

In the next aisle, the end of one of the chains was pulled toward the magnetic nail retriever. The chain began to unspool and a link got caught on the magnetic tip of the retriever. The chain began pulling the retriever forward and down as the spool turned, and more and more chain began to droop to the floor. After a moment, the nail retriever was pulled completely off the shelf and fell down onto the forklift's controls. The chain came too, and hooked itself over the on/off key.

As more chain piled down, the weight of it and the nail retriever pulled the key into the "ON" position. The forklift whirred quietly to life. Above it, the end of the chain flipped off the spool and whipped

out into space. The very last link hit the heavy box of nails that was sitting on the pallet that was resting on the forklift's raised forks. The force of the blow was just enough to tip the box off the pallet. It fell to the forklift below, and landed squarely on the round pedal of the machine's dead man switch.

The driverless forklift jolted forward, then smoothed out into its usual four mile an hour crawl, heading down the long aisle. At the end of the aisle, Wendy and Kevin, and Erin and Ian circled around a shelf piled high with stacks of plywood that ran perpendicular to the other shelves, on their way to the cutting area. The forklift rumbled toward the shelf.

When they got there, Ian muscled a four by eight sheet of plywood off a stack. He walked it toward a vertical saw system, which was mounted against one of the massive shelving units, then slipped in a patch of sawdust. He caught himself and kept going, laughing to himself.

"Whoa, I almost died," he said. "Almost completed the prophecy. My god, it's all true."

He set the sheet into the saw frame and bolted it into place.

"Come on, Ian," Wendy said. "This is serious. Something is happening. If you can't see that, then your precious logic is blinding you to reality."

Ian pulled his goggles down over his eyes and turned on the saw. The motor roared to life, loud in his ears. The canvas bag that caught the sawdust inflated like some sort of shuddering egg sac.

On the other side of the shelf, the driverless forklift reached the end of the aisle, and bumped into the structure of the shelf. The forks and pallet slipped in between the second and third shelves. It stopped the vehicle's forward motion, but the forklift continued to press forward. The impact knocked a few sixteen-ounce claw hammers off their hooks. Two of them fell on the pallet, but a third bounced off it and fell to the forklift below. The claw of the hammer caught on the handle of one of the lift's gears, pulling it down.

The gear engaged and the forks began to rise, lifting the pallet with them. The forks pressed the pallet into the underside of the third shelf. The wood of the pallet began to crush and splinter, and the

shelves began to groan with the pressure. At the base of the shelves, the heavy bolts that fixed them to the floor strained against the shelves' metal feet.

On the other side of the shelf, Ian took the cut pieces of plywood off the saw frame and put them aside. He took another un-cut sheet and fixed it to the frame, talking over the whine of the saw.

"Okay," he said. "Just for shits and giggles, let's go with what you're saying. Let's say that Death is a conscious entity, and it has a plan, which it has now set in motion."

The saw whined as it chewed through the wood, masking the sound of the straining metal shelves as the forks pushed at them, and the shifting of the stacks of plywood on the top shelf as they tipped forward with the shelf.

Ian pulled his goggles down again, but paused before cutting the second sheet so he could shout forth his proposition.

"And let us further say," he continued, "that Newton's third law of motion, which as we all know is 'that every action has an equal and opposite reaction,' applies to death, oh I'm sorry, that's Death, with a capital 'D' of course, when he operates in this world."

On the other side of the shelf, unheard by any of them, the forks continued to press into the metal shelving supports, twisting and buckling them, and bending the bolts that held them in place. The stacks of plywood continued to shift forward as the angle of the shelves got more and more acute. The boards strained against the green vinyl bands that held them together.

"So," Ian continued. "If Death takes an action, we could take an equal and opposite reaction, and... and thwart Death's intent."

Wendy's eyes looked away from Ian's face and dropped to the ground. Kevin saw a curl of movement at her feet. The sawdust was swirling and rising as if in a light breeze, but there was no breeze. Her face was tight and pale.

"You're being a smart ass fucker," Kevin said to Ian, moving protectively closer to Wendy. "But go on."

"Well," Ian said. "What if..." He glared pointedly at Wendy and Kevin. "What if the last in line were to make a noble sacrifice, and... kill themselves." He grinned, triumphant. "That would thwart

Death's plan, and save the lives of the people who were skipped." He held out his hand to Wendy and Kevin like a game show host. "Any takers? Anybody want to do the noble thing? Anybody?"

Wendy and Kevin looked at each other. It was an unsettling theory.

Ian laughed and turned away from them. "Didn't think so," he said.

Wendy bent her head to check the photo of Erin and Ian again. Kevin strained to see the photo, wondering what she was looking at. Those tapered banners over Ian's head in the photo. Where had he just seen that shape? He searched the shelves behind Ian, but saw nothing until Wendy pointed up at the shape drawn on a price marker for surveyor stakes. The second shelf was divided into three bins, open at the front, containing hundreds of the one by three by twenty-four inch wooden stakes. Individually they were as sharp as daggers, collectively they were as heavy as a small car. Their points matched the color and shape of the tapered banners.

"Those," she yelled, pointing at the bins of stakes. "There."

Kevin and Ian looked up, just as, on the far side of the shelf, the constant pressure of the forklift's rising forks finally snapped two of the bolts that held the shelving to the floor, and the entire shelving unit began to tip. Kevin and Ian gasped as the shelves trembled and began to loom over them.

Another bolt snapped and the shelves rocked forward. Hundreds of surveyor stakes tumbled out of their bins and flew down toward Kevin and Ian. Kevin, just a little more prepared by his paranoia, grabbed Ian and pulled him out of the way, while Wendy and Erin screamed and backed away. The stakes hit the floor tip-first, striking chips out of the concrete, and bouncing and clattering in every direction.

Kevin and Ian stumbled into the shelves, gasping in simultaneous terror and relief, as the rain of stakes tapered off. Kevin let out a long breath.

"Shit," he said. "That was close. Those things almost..." He stopped as he felt the shelves leaning into him. "Hey, the shelves..." He and Ian looked up.

Above their heads, on the third shelf, one forty-eight count stack of plywood sheets slid and slammed into another. The impact snapped the already straining green vinyl binding straps, and the four by eight sheets of plywood began spilling down toward Kevin and Ian one at a time, like cards being dealt off the top of the deck. Kevin and Ian ducked left, away from the falling sheets as they came down like guillotine blades and splintered and ricocheted off the concrete.

The stack beside the first stack of plywood broke too, and more plywood began sheeting down.

"Run!" Kevin cried.

He leapt away. Ian tried to follow, but a falling sheet caught him a glancing blow on the shoulder and he went down, feet tangled in the pick-up-sticks pile of surveyor stakes that was strewn across the floor. More sheets were raining down towards him. Kevin looked back and grabbed Ian's wrist. Hauling with all his strength, he dragged Ian clear as the plywood crashed, cracked and splintered, inches from his combat boots.

The last board landed on the tips of some of the surveyor stakes, flipping them up and catapulting them through the air, straight at Erin. She ducked, and the stakes shot past her. Their sharp tips punctured the exhaust bag of the circular saw and clouds of fine sawdust shot out of the bag and engulfed Erin. She backed up, covering her face with one hand, and coughing violently.

Erin's foot slipped in a drift of loose sawdust and she fell backward against Ian's forklift. Her hand still half covering her face, Erin's head banged flush against the nozzle of the nailgun Ian had left there. With a staccato *FWWWT! FWWWT! FWWWT!* her head and hand were riddled with a dozen nails shot from the gun at incredible velocity. The nails protruded slightly from her cheeks, chin, and lips, glinting like new facial piercings. One stuck out of her open, staring eye, the wickedly sharp point of the nail glistening with ooze from her slowly deflating eyeball. Her hand was nailed to her face. The nails stuck through her palm like steel stigmata. The photo of Erin and Ian at the shooting gallery fluttered down and landed on her chest. Her pose in the picture mimicked her death pose exactly.

Wendy, cowering nearby, screamed and covered her eyes. Kevin ran to her, pulling her close.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Not again."

Ian stared at Erin, eyes full of grief and disbelieving horror.

"Erin." He took a step toward her, then another. "Erin?"

His hands reached out toward her involuntarily, but then he stopped. His eyes lowered to the photo on Erin's chest, and then flicked back up to her face. His eyes widened as he saw the similarities.

"It's true," he whispered. "It's all true." He caught his breath. "That means..."

His eyes darted up at Wendy and burned into her. She flinched away from their intense hatred, burying her face in Kevin's chest. Ian took a menacing step toward them.

"If she hadn't taken Erin's picture..." Ian said.

"Now wait a minute, McKinley," Kevin said. "The camera doesn't cause the deaths, it just..."

"Ian? Erin?" A deep male voice called. "What the hell is all that noise?"

Kevin, Wendy and Ian looked up as bustling footsteps grew louder. The supervisor, shift manager and some other employees in orange aprons rounded a rank of shelves and started toward them. The big warehouse space was filled with gasps and exclamations of horror. Ian backed away, wordless, eyes never leaving Wendy.

# TWENTY-TWO

When Clark and Polanski arrived on the scene of the Home Land incident, Clark was not even remotely surprised to find Kevin Fischer and Wendy Christensen, still dressed in the stolen Sultan's sweats and clinging to one another like war refugees over by a display leaf blowers. There could be no more doubt that there was something going on here, something that could not be explained by mere coincidence.

Never, in the entire history of McKinley, had so many fatal accidents occurred in such a short time span. The fact that these two were present at the last three made it all seem even stranger. Clark was forced to rethink the tanning booth fire too. Even though Fischer and Christensen weren't there at the time, the two victims were certainly known to them. And how about that Red River business? That was technically out of McKinley PD jurisdiction, but Clark felt it needed to be looked into, in light of these other recent, inexplicable events.

When they brought the two kids in for questioning, Chief Firebaugh wanted Valentine to have a go at them. Clark had been just a tiny bit peeved at first, since he did feel a kind of weirdly proprietary sense of ownership over these interconnected cases, but the honest truth was that Clark didn't have the first clue where to begin questioning the two kids. It was all far too strange, and there was an insistent, off key kind of wrongness about the whole mess that made Clark want nothing more to do with it.

What he did want was to be off duty. To hightail it out of here and not take his foot off the gas until he hit Miranda's driveway. Miranda was really the best of them. Buxom and intelligent and infinitely tolerant, she knew he was full of shit, but seemed to love him anyway. She would make all this go away.

Clark eyed his watch. He still had thirteen minutes left of his shift. Sighing, he poured himself another cup of toxic department coffee and headed over to the fish tank to watch Valentine work.

Polanski was already there, peering intently through the one-way glass like an aspiring actor watching Olivier do Hamlet. Valentine's broad back was to the glass, posture casual beneath his cheap brown jacket. The girl, Wendy Christensen, was in the opposite chair, facing them. She looked exhausted and haunted, big dark eyes shadowed and full of anguish in her pale narrow face.

Valentine gave her a can of Seven Up, sliding it across the surface of the table like a peace offering. She looked down at the green aluminum can like it was some kind of alien artifact, then slowly reached out and picked it up, opened it and took a sip.

When she put the can down, she began to speak, a gush and tumble of words, hands shaping the air as she spoke. Valentine just nodded, noncommittal, listening. Occasionally, he seemed to ask for clarification, and she would frown and look away, then continue. Clark was curious about what kind of story she was weaving, but at the same time he didn't want to know. He looked back down at his watch. The shift had ended four minutes ago.

"Dom," he said, placing his hand on Polanski's shoulder. "It's about that time."

Polanski shook his head, not taking his eyes off the action inside the fish tank. "I'm gonna stay for a while longer," he said. "I want to go over the statements and see what I can put together."

"Whatever, man," Clark said. "I'm outta here."

"Don't forget that we're covering that Tri-Centennial thing later tonight," Polanski said. "Remember you said you needed the overtime."

Clark rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Damn," he said. "I forgot all about that." He looked back down at his watch. "I better get my ass over to Miranda's. Looks like there's just enough time for a quickie."

"It's always a quickie with you, Clark," Polanski said, voice utterly deadpan. "That's your problem."

"Am I hearing things?" Clark asked, eyes wide with mock amazement. "Was that... humor I detected there for a second?"

Polanski shrugged, only the tiniest hint of a smile at the corner of his lips.

"There may be hope for you yet, kid," Clark said.

He turned to go, but couldn't resist one more look back into the fish tank. The girl had raised her hand above her head and then brought it down in a swift, guillotine-like motion against her other palm. Clark shivered. He could not get out of there fast enough.

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Kevin stood alone on the steps of the McKinley Police Station, hands making anxious fists at his sides as he paced in tense, zoo animal circles. He wondered how much longer they were going to keep badgering Wendy. He couldn't help but worry about her. Wendy was a good girl. She had never been inside the police station in her life. Kevin, on the other hand, had been brought in more than once. Criminal mischief, public lewdness, defacing public property, nothing major, and it had all been expunged from his record as soon as he hit eighteen, but still, he knew the drill. Plus, he was good at weaseling out of trouble and he knew it. He always had been.

Wendy, on the other hand, had no idea what to expect, and Kevin was sure that prick Valentine was using her fear and naiveté to try to break her, make her say something incriminating, even though she hadn't done anything wrong.

When he saw her slender figure behind the double glass doors, escorted by the younger blond cop, the powerful wave of relief that washed over him made him feel a little sick. He did not want to make a big deal out of it in case that cop was watching them, so he just waited silently for her, struggling to keep his face neutral.

She pushed the doors open and came over to where he stood. Her big liquid brown eyes were bloodshot and sleepless, rimmed with red, and dull with the horrors they had witnessed, yet there was still a kind of wired urgency in her petite frame, chin firm and defiant. She nodded a wordless greeting and together, they made their way towards the parking lot.

"I didn't say anything," Kevin told her, pitching his voice low even though there was no way that cop could hear them. "I think they were trying to scare us into saying something, but they had nothing

on us, no cause to keep us here. How about you? What did you tell them?"

He could see a complex swirl of emotion rising in her eyes. She seemed exhausted, frustrated and scared, but still ready to fight.

"What did I tell them?" she asked. "Everything. What was I supposed to do, make up some lie and get us into even more trouble? I haven't done anything wrong, so I told the truth. I told them about the pictures in the camera, and Frank and Lewis, and Flight 180, and why we went to see Ian and Erin. Everything."

Kevin took her gently by the arm, hoping to calm her. "Did they believe you?" he asked.

Wendy snorted, shaking her head. "Yeah right," she said. "What do you think? Would you believe us?" She looked away. "No. The guy looked at me like I was totally whacked."

"Ten hours," Kevin said. "Ten fucking hours they kept us and the only conclusion they could come to is that you are whacked. McKinley's finest at work."

"Was it really that long?" Wendy asked. "For all we know, whoever was sitting behind Erin and Ian is already dead by now." She paused, searching Kevin's face. "That would mean we're next. Right now."

They had reached the slot where Wendy's truck was parked. She hit the keyless entry button on her key chain and put her hand on the door, but didn't open it.

"Ian almost died first," she said. "But we stopped it. We intervened, so it... it skipped Ian. That's gotta be the way we regain control. If someone intercedes, then the life that was supposed to be next is skipped."

Kevin frowned, tense and considering. "Okay, so..." he said. "From the way we sat in the roller coaster, I'd be first and then..." He paused, throat tight. "Then you."

Wendy nodded slowly, but still with that defiant set to her jaw.

"We can beat this," she said, voice strong and steady. "We're so close, we can't give up now."

Kevin smiled ruefully. "You're starting to sound like me," he said.

She looked up, locking his gaze for several seconds, then turning away, scanning the empty lot.

"So now what?" she asked.

"Now I gotta go to work," Kevin replied. "I'm working security at that Tri-Centennial celebration deal. If I don't show up I'll get canned."

Wendy's brows knitted, incredulous. "After what we've seen," she said, "you're worried about getting fired?"

"I get credit towards my sheriff training for this job," he said. "If I blow it off, It'll hurt my chances of getting into the academy." He looked back over his shoulder at the double glass doors of the police station, but it was impossible to see if the two cops were still there. "And after today, getting hauled in for questioning can't help."

"Sheriff training?" Wendy asked. "But what about UNLV? Shark jumping with Carol Alt in a bikini and your big career with the NFL?"

Kevin looked down and away. "There's really no point without Jay," he said softly. "And since all this madness started, I've been thinking very seriously about the future. See, I'm planning on having one. And not just a future, but one with you in it."

He reached out and took Wendy's hand. "I mean, not that you have to be with me, or whatever..." he said. "I mean... if you don't want to." He squeezed her fingers. "What I'm trying to say, Wendy, is that I want you to have a future too."

She looked up at him, tiny lines creasing between her dark eyebrows, but then a car horn sounded, nearly startling Kevin out of his skin. He turned and saw his father's battered work truck pulling up to the curb, his father's scowling face hovering above the rolled down window.

"Shit," Kevin said, dropping Wendy's hand. "My dad is here. I better go. I'm gonna have to listen to an endless lecture all the way home."

"Maybe..." Wendy reached out and touched Kevin's arm. "I mean... shouldn't we stick together?"

"It's only a couple of hours," Kevin said. "You go home and search those photos for clues and I'll ask everyone I can find at the fair if they can remember who else got off the ride with us."

Wendy nodded, but he could see in her tense posture that there was something more that she needed to say. He hesitated, waiting for

her to speak.

"Is there something I need to know before I go?" he finally asked.  
"Maybe something about my photo?"

Wendy shook her head.

"Then what?" Kevin asked.

"It's just that..." She looked away. "I'll just be freaking out every second, worried and hoping that you're okay."

Kevin felt a smile slowly surface. "Why?" he asked. "We don't even like each other, remember?"

Wendy shrugged, a sheepish grin creeping across her lips, clearly chagrined to have her own thoughtless words thrown back at her. To his surprise, she pulled him into a tight embrace. He closed his eyes for a precious second, arms around her and wishing fiercely that they were somewhere else, anywhere else. Somewhere safe.

His father's horn sounded again and Kevin felt a cold spike of frustration. He turned back to his father holding up a single finger.

"I have my cell," Kevin said. "Anything happens, and I mean anything, you call me, okay?"

"Okay," Wendy said.

"Hell," Kevin said. "Even if nothing happens, call me anyway. Just call me and let me know you are okay."

"Yes, Daddy," she said, smirking.

"Please," Kevin groaned. "Do not call me that. That gets us into a whole weird area and it's making my pants fit funny."

Wendy laughed and gestured to his goofy, too tight Sultans sweats. "Your pants already fit funny," she said.

He grinned and shook his head. "Just call me, all right?" he asked.

"I said I would, didn't I?" she said, making shooing motions with both hands. "Go on."

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Wendy knew that she was dreaming, but she couldn't make herself wake up.

She had gotten back to her house and raced up to her room to her computer, but after about thirty minutes of staring at the pictures on

the monitor, her eyes had gone woozy and unfocused. She had lowered her head onto her folded arms, just wanting to rest her eyes for a second or two. The next thing she knew she was caught up in a horrible nightmare.

It started off at Red River, and everything was on fire, cold, sinister, blue and white flames that burned endlessly without consuming. Instead of heat, the flames gave off intense cold that felt almost like burning. Wendy ran through the flaming midway, desperately searching for Jason, or was it Kevin? She kept thinking she saw people, but when she got closer, she discovered that they were just big, flat, paper cutouts, life-sized photos that scattered into snowy fragments when she touched them.

When she finally found Jason, she saw him standing with Kevin and Carrie by the deep fried Snickers sign. She screamed his name, but when he turned to the sound of her voice she saw with horror that his face was scribbled out with thick black streaks. The scribbles moved and writhed over his face, and in the air around his head like living things, some kind of poisonous snakes or eels. Carrie turned, and her face was scribbled out too. Only Kevin's face was normal, but the scribbles were twisting through the air from Jason and Carrie's heads, reaching towards Kevin. Didn't he see them? She had to warn Kevin, but he didn't seem to hear her voice. Then she heard a sound, a soft, metallic tinkling, and she turned and saw her sister Julie standing by a merry-go-round. The snarling carousel horses had manes and tails of flame, and their eyes rolled wildly in their heads. Julie was holding something out to her. Wendy ran to Julie, but she couldn't seem to get any closer. Behind Julie, the carousel started up with a blast of loud, discordant organ music that sounded like a record played just a little too slow.

The spinning horses behind Julie went faster and faster, and there was a sound like rapid hoof beats, or was it heartbeats? Julie held something out to her and Wendy desperately stretched out her hand to reach it. It was a photo, a photo of their grandmother—the same photo that Jason always used to turn to face the wall whenever he came over. As soon as Wendy's fingertips brushed against the edge of the old photograph, the entire scene began to twist and melt around

her, spiraling away into blurred oblivion as that curious tinkling sound echoed through her head.

But what was that sound? That delicate tinkling silver sound? It seemed so familiar. The tattered fragments of her dream began to dissolve and she opened her eyes. She was sitting on her desk, head cradled in her arms. On the monitor in front of her was that frustratingly useless photograph of everyone on the roller coaster, the attendant's arm blocking the center of the shot. Wendy squinted at his plaid sleeve as if she could will it away just by staring hard enough, and her eye was drawn to the pale moving hand and wrist behind the attendant's arm, the hand that had to belong to whoever was in the seat in front of them on the ride. She could see a sweatshirt cuff, a slice of skinny wrist and the blurred, moving hand. Then she saw something else. There was a glint of metal between the cuff and the hand.

Wendy reached for the mouse and selected magnify from the menu, then clicked on that section of the image. A vertiginous zoom and the glint was a little clearer. A watch? She clicked again and the zoom focused in on just the wrist, the cuff and the hand. With the picture blown up so large it was difficult to make out detail. Everything looked pixilated and distorted. She peered more closely at the screen, her desperate eye hunting for familiar details. It wasn't a watch, it was a bracelet, a silver bracelet. Wendy felt a hollow sick elevator plunge inside her belly. It was Julie's bracelet, the good luck bracelet given to her by their grandmother. Julie. Julie snuck on the ride. Suddenly, with painful clarity, Wendy could see the two girls in hoody sweatshirts, brand new hoodys they had bought only minutes before getting on the ride.

They didn't have their hoods up because they were worried about messing up their hair. They didn't want Wendy to recognize them. The one here on the right was Julie, but who was this other one? It must have been either Amber or Perry. Wendy reached for the bracelet on the desk where Julie had left it when she told Wendy she could take it with her to Yale. She wanted to hold it up to the screen and compare it to the photo, just to be sure, but it was gone. Frowning, she looked around the surface of her immaculately neat

and organized desk. It was nowhere to be seen. She looked down on the floor, wondering if it had fallen. She found nothing.

Wendy heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway and a door opening, then slamming. What was that sound in her dream? That sound that seemed so important, a gentle silvery tinkle? The bracelet. Julie had taken the bracelet.

Wendy tore from her room and pounded down the stairs, flinging open the front door and shouting Julie's name. She arrived just in time to see Perry's battered, purple Saturn peeling out of the driveway, noisy raucous music blasting from the rolled down windows.

"Goddamn it," Wendy cursed, slamming her fist into the doorframe.

"Language," her mother warned from the kitchen. in the most dippy, clueless tone. "I thought we agreed not to swear in this house, Wendy."

Wendy felt a nearly blinding wave of killing frustration, but she bit down on her lip and forced herself to breathe normally.

"Do you know where Julie went?" Wendy asked, fighting to keep the panic out of her voice.

"She went to that Tri-Centennial fair," Wendy's mom replied. "Your father and I are going to head over there for the fireworks show as soon as I've finished packing up this cheese and fruit I picked up at the farmer's market. I thought we'd have a little picnic. These blueberries are so nice. They're an antioxidant super food, you know. You are welcome to ride down with us, honey. I think it would be a good idea for you to get out and enjoy life. You've been so..."

Wendy left her mother chattering away and went to get her cellphone.

First she called Julie. It went directly to voice mail.

"Hi," Julie's perky message said. "You've reached Robo-Julie. Obviously you're not good enough to talk to the real Julie, so start sweet talking Robo-Julie after the beep and maybe if you're lucky, the real Julie might call you back."

"Julie," Wendy said and then paused. What the hell was she supposed to say? There was no way her sister was going to believe

any of this. "Call me on my cell right away." She paused again, torn, then hit end.

She cursed softly to herself and then her gaze snagged on that zoomed in photo, that fragment of Julie's hand and wrist. Goddamn her, the little sneak. What the hell was she thinking? She knew she wasn't allowed on a ride like that. The posted sign right there in the line had said so. Even without the accident, the vision and all the madness, Julie could have died on that ride. Now she was caught up in all this, locked into this awful pattern of brutal bookkeeping.

Wendy couldn't help but feel doubly responsible. In a way she felt responsible for all the deaths, but with Julie, she knew she could have done more. She could have turned her around and marched her home, or called their mom to come and get her. She should never have been there in the first place.

All this guilt and rumination wasn't going to solve anything, so she speed dialed Kevin, pressing the little phone to her ear. He picked up before the first ring could finish.

"Wendy," Kevin said. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Wendy replied. "Do you remember Julie being on Devil's Flight with us?"

"Your sister?" Kevin asked. "No. And anyway she's got that heart thing, right? They don't let people with heart conditions on that ride. Besides, if she had been, don't you think she would have said something by now?"

"She knew she wasn't supposed to be on that ride," Wendy wailed.

"Wait a minute," Kevin said. "What makes you think it was Julie?"

"The kids we couldn't see, the ones in between Ian and Erin, and you and me, one of them was wearing an art deco bracelet just like Julie's good luck bracelet, the one given to her by our grandmother."

"Shit," Kevin said. "That means she's next. Did you warn her?"

"She left for the Tri-Centennial fair before I could catch her," Wendy said. "Amber and Perry are with her. I'd be willing to bet that one of those two girls was the other mystery guest on Devil's Flight. We've gotta talk to them before..."

"OK," Kevin said. "I'm there now, I'll find them."

"I'm on my way," Wendy replied.

"Wait," Kevin said just as she was about to hang up.

"What?" she asked.

"Did you see anything in Julie's picture?" he asked. "Anything I can tell her to stay away from?"

Wendy moved to her desk and clicked away the enlarged photo, mousing around until she found the thumbnail of Julie giving the double bird to the camera. She clicked on it and it opened.

"She's got her tongue out and two middle fingers up," Wendy said, scrutinizing every detail. "She's standing in the center of the midway, game booths and things all around. Part of one of her friends is on the right side of the frame, moving and blurry. I think it might be Perry because there's some blonde hair at the top, but it might just be a yellow light reflection."

Wendy studied every inch of the frame, but it was busy with detail, lights, banners, balloons, neon and hanging streamers, and it was impossible to know what was relevant and what was not. Julie was wearing a pink vintage T-shirt with a silhouette of a rearing horse. Her blurry friend had a vintage tee as well, something with an American flag and what was probably a bald eagle, though the photo made it difficult to tell.

"I just don't know, Kevin," Wendy said. "It's so hard to tell until the situation is already happening, like with Ian and those tan banners. I'm gonna print this out and bring it. Maybe when I'm there, I'll see something..."

"One other thing," Kevin said.

"Yeah?" Wendy clicked print and fed a piece of high quality photo paper into the printer.

"After them..." he said. "We'll be next."

Wendy tried to swallow around the lump of ice that had formed inside her throat. "Yeah," she said softly. "Yeah, that's right."

"So," Kevin continued. "In case something happens to them before we meet up." He paused. Wendy could hear cheerful music and laughter in the background. She felt sick. "That time we talked about... you know, when to look at our own pictures?" He paused again. "It's now."

Wendy pulled up her own photo, the one that Kevin had taken of her and Jason. Jason had his arm around her. The background was a dark, out of focus blur.

"There's nothing," she said. "No clue at all. It's just me and Jay standing in front of a dark, blurry background. I'm not holding anything or near anything. It's just totally normal and ordinary. Jay's got his arm around me." She paused, feeling a cool eddy of sadness swirling through her belly. "Nothing. There's nothing."

"What about...?" Kevin asked, unable to finish the sentence.

Wendy closed the photo of her and Jason and searched out the thumbnail of Kevin. When she found it, she clicked on it to open it.

It was the close-up Wendy had snapped right after Kevin took the shot of those panties. His face was washed out and overexposed from the flash, mouth open, and blue eyes huge and terrified.

"Remember when I made the flash go off in your eyes?" Wendy asked. "Right after you took the shot of Stacy's panties?"

"Sure," Kevin said. "Is that my photo?"

"Yeah," Wendy said. "It's super close, over exposed and all out of focus. The bright flash lit up your face and you look really scared. Almost like..."

"Like, say, oh..." Kevin said with a tone of dark dread. "Maybe a firework going off in my face?"

"Oh my God," Wendy said, remembering what her mom had said about the fireworks display. "Kevin, you need to stay away from any fireworks."

"And how do you propose I do that at a fireworks show?" Kevin asked, his voice tense and anxious.

"Leave now," Wendy said. "Never mind getting fired, you need to get away from there right now."

A coiling knot of fear tightened inside her heart. She could not bear the thought of anything happening to Kevin.

"I can't do that, Wendy," Kevin said. "I have to find Julie. If we can save her, then maybe that will break the order and you and I will both be safe."

"Jesus," Wendy said softly. "I really hope you're right."

# TWENTY-THREE

The McKinley Tri-Centennial Fair, as the name suggested, celebrated the town's third century of existence, though as was often the case with this sort of celebration, large chunks of the town's history were often tactfully ignored. Its humble beginnings as Beaversport, originally a trading post for fur trappers, was proudly acknowledged, as evidenced by the buckskin-clad men in coonskin caps that welcomed people through the wooden palisade gates into the park where it was being held.

The town's role as a staunch supporter of the colony's rebellion against British rule was well documented by the "colonial village" that had been set up around the park pond. Blacksmiths in traditional garb shod horses that didn't need shoeing and made black iron shackles and other period novelties. Women in enormous bonnets and tight fitting bodices churned butter and stitched quilts. Young girls with braces and acne sold funnel cake, candy apples and other "olde time" treats from quaint, half timbered kiosks with McKinley Area Department of Health certificates mounted prominently in antique picture frames.

Unsurprisingly however, the fact that the trappers that founded the village took the land by the simple expedient of slaughtering its original occupants, a tribe of Iroquois, down to the last man, woman and child was not highlighted. Nor was there any mention of the hundred years of brisk trade with pirates who raided British, Spanish and French ships in the Caribbean, and sold their goods to the "honest" people of Beaversport. The McKinley brothers' various shady dealings, financial shenanigans, and less than savory business partners were never mentioned, and neither were the generations of stolen childhoods, as hundreds upon hundreds of child laborers were chewed up and spat out in the steaming, mechanized hell of the textile mills, dying young to build the McKinley fortune. There was also no celebration of the fact that the town survived the depression by serving as a port for Canadian bootleggers, with Connor McKinley taking a financial bite out of every passing barrel.

Instead, rosy cheeked, tow headed tots in buckle shoes and tri-corner hats ran around with balloons, and mechanics, accountants and firemen, dressed in buff and green colonial militia uniforms and armed with flintlocks and muskets, re-enacted dubiously historical battles in which they fought high school teachers, shopkeepers and television repairmen dressed in lobster red uniforms with bright brass buttons.

In addition to the faux colonial village, there were all the usual entertainments found at small town fairs: carnival rides and midway games, hot dog, pizza, kettle corn, and fried chicken stands, the Future Farmers of America livestock show, local garage bands performing the latest from Good Charlotte and the White Stripes, a square dancing competition with no competitors under sixty years of age, local radio stations giving away T-shirts, buttons and CDs, and, of course, after the sun went down, a fireworks display.

All strata of McKinley society mingled and rubbed elbows at the fair. Aerobicized yuppie moms pushing expensive, high tech strollers, and blue-collar dads with laughing sons bouncing on their broad shoulders. Sticky fingered kids mouthing cotton candy, and uncertain old folks with their blankets and picnic baskets making their slow and careful way to the big field to watch the fireworks. History buffs in colonial garb comparing cap and ball pistols, and uniformed police officers talking shop about Heckler and Koch's new cutting edge compacts, wound ballistics and the latest in non-lethal technology. Gangs of slouching teenage boys trying not to cough around their cigarettes, hiding contraband beers and looking for trouble. Gangs of giggling teenage girls sucking on ice-pops and looking for boys. Young couples who saw nothing but each other, and older married couples who hadn't noticed one another in years. Everyone was there, breathing in the rich and contradictory smells of hay, horseshit, gunpowder, cotton candy and frying meat.

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Kevin closed his cellphone and put it back in his jacket pocket. He looked around at the Tri-Centennial celebration as if it had suddenly

turned into a pit of vipers. There seemed to be danger everywhere, particularly behind him. The captain of the security detail had placed him at the barricade that blocked off the area where pyrotechnicians were setting up the night's fireworks display. He watched them nervously, eyes drawn from one lethal item to another.

Dozens of metal mortar tubes lay together like cigarettes in a pack, bolted into sturdy wooden frames, red and yellow wires spilling from their far ends. The technicians attached the wires to a series of "electronic match" igniters and then hooked the igniters to a computer notebook that sat on a card table nearby. Some of the mortar frames were staked into the ground. Others sat on a small, two-wheeled trailer. A metal rod was placed below the trailer hitch to keep it level.

One of the technicians, an old man in faded green coveralls with "Celli and Sons Fireworks" stitched on the back, lifted a heavy oblong firework package out of a crate marked "DANGER—HIGH EXPLOSIVES" and stenciled with a skull and crossbones and a fire icon. He carried it, cradled in his arms like a baby, to a mortar frame, and lowered it gingerly into the tube, fuse end down.

Kevin blinked. For a moment the ends of the mortars all looked like the wide gaping maws of some sort of hungry eels on the Discovery Channel. He was letting his imagination get completely out of hand, but the danger was real, no doubt about that. Each one of those firebreathing throats could be the instrument of his demise. He had a sudden, almost overwhelming urge to throw off his security jacket and run as fast and as far as he could from this stupid Tri-centennial celebration, from the town of McKinley, and from all of this endless, grinding fear, but he couldn't run, he couldn't.

Julie was next, or one of her friends, and he had to try to save them first. It would destroy Wendy if anything happened to Julie, and Kevin could no more allow that than he could allow Wendy to be killed. His own life was the least of his worries. He had to stay, for her. Only after he knew without a doubt that she was safe, would he be able to think about himself. He looked back down at his cellphone. Was she ok? Why wasn't she here yet? Could there have been some sort of...

He shook his head. No, if the order was right, and so far they had no reason to think it wasn't, then nothing could happen to Wendy while he was alive. So in a way, watching out for himself was watching out for her. He glanced back at the mortar tubes. He just wished she would hurry up and get here.

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Wendy was pushing her truck up to sixty-five when she hit Old Mill Road, the twisting, potholed street that was the only way to get to the isolated fairground. The Ranger was no sports car and took the turns like a lumbering buffalo, forcing Wendy to slow to below fifty as she dragged the truck around a narrow hairpin left. Anxiety bristled inside her, raking its nails along her spine and squeezing her pounding heart. She was terrified for vulnerable Julie. All Death had to do to her was give her a good scare and her poor limping heart would seize up on her and do Death's work for him. Wendy had called Julie's cellphone a hundred times, but every time it went straight to voicemail. Julie had probably forgotten to charge it, as usual. The anxiety around Wendy's spine coiled tighter and she nudged the protesting truck up to sixty.

In a flash, a pale, lanky shape bounded out into Wendy's headlights. She let out a tight, airless little scream and slammed on the breaks, swerving hard to the right.

Dog? she thought as the creature turned flashing green eyes on her.

She slowed to a skidding stop on the shoulder, gravel spraying out from beneath the truck's tires in a noisy patter. The animal she'd nearly hit was standing in the middle of the road, looking at her. It had to be some kind of husky or malamute or something like that, but it was huge and gawky, its legs and snout way too long. No collar. Really it looked more like a wolf. Ridiculous, since there had not been wild wolves in McKinley in over a hundred years. Must be one of those wolf-dog hybrids people were breeding now. Whatever it was, she did not like the way it was looking at her.

The animal—wolf, dog, whatever—turned its snout and bounded away into the dark woods bordering the old road. Wendy shook her head and put the truck in gear, pulling back out into the road, when suddenly all her dashboard lights went black. The seemingly lifeless radio burst into sudden, staticky life, making her jump in her seat. She slowed the truck down to a ten-mile an hour crawl, tapping the dash. Nothing. Then a song surfaced from beneath the static. Not just any song, but that same corny song that had started playing on the radio in Kevin's truck right before...

"There is someone walking behind you," the voice on the darkened radio sang. "Turn around. Look at me."

Fear flushed like freon through Wendy's veins, and her gaze flicked up to her rearview mirror. There was a car coming around the hairpin turn, just two dots of light in the distance.

Following her?

Then, something inexplicable happened. A formless wave of inky black rippled across the narrow face of her rearview mirror, erasing the image of the headlights behind her.

What the hell was happening? Was Death toying with her again, playing with her and delaying her just to make her suffer, before she arrived too late to save anyone? Or worse, had Julie and Kevin already been killed? Was this it? Was it her turn?

She stomped on the accelerator and bit down hard on the tender meat inside her lower lip, hard enough to draw blood. With that hot penny taste in her mouth, she sped down the road towards the fair. She did not look in the rearview mirror again.

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A couple of twelve year-old boys, a redhead and a blond, charged out of the Tri-Centennial fair crowd toward Kevin, mock sword-fighting with hissing, spitting sparklers. Before Kevin could react, the redhead trapped the blond against the barricade. The blond ducked under and the redhead made to follow. Kevin's blood ran cold.

"Hey," he shouted, running over and grabbing their arms. "Dude. Get out of here with those things. You want to set that shit off?"

He gestured to the mortar tubes. The kids looked around at the huge array of fireworks, and grinned like cute little angels.

"That would fuckin' rock," said the redhead.

"Fuckin' A," said the blond.

"Jesus," Kevin said. "I got news for you kids, getting your face blown off does not fuckin' rock. In fact, it fuckin' sucks. Get the hell out of here willya?"

"Fuck you," said the redhead, and ran off with the blond kid, still sword fighting with the white hot sticks.

Kevin swallowed and passed a hand over his eyes. There was one potential death avoided. He started scanning the crowd again as he tried to push his heartbeat back down closer to normal. He wondered where Julie was. He scanned the evermoving crowd, trying to pick out her petite, curvy figure from the sea of petite, curvy figures that strolled through the fairground. Why did all girls in McKinley have to dress exactly the same? Was there a bulletin that was posted somewhere? This week we all wear bright colored hoodys, hip hugger jeans, baby tees, and pink sandals with plastic flowers on the toes.

Was that Julie? Three girls were goofing around with Mylar balloons, bouncing them off the heads of three boys, but Kevin couldn't get a good enough look at the girls. He stood on tiptoe. One of the boys grabbed a balloon and rubbed it on the baby fine blonde hair of one of the girls.

"Ah," she cried, jerking away. "It shocked me. Get off."

She pushed the boy's arm away and the static of the balloon caused her hair to stick to it, rising up off her head like the *Bride of Frankenstein*. Her friends laughed, then all started rubbing the balloons on each other's hair. None of them, however, was Julie.

Kevin cursed. Where was she? He wished he could leave his post, but orders were orders. Surely she had to walk by sometime. The fair wasn't all that big. He just wanted it to happen now. He had to warn Julie about the danger she was facing before it was too late, though he didn't know what he was going to tell her. Without Wendy's pictures to back up the story, it all sounded pretty lame. And what was supposed to happen to Julie anyway? Wendy hadn't told him

any details about Julie's picture. Christ. It could be anything. Anything.

A loud voice beside him made him jump.

"The British are coming! The British are coming!"

Kevin spun around. An actor dressed as Paul Revere was spurring his horse through the crowd, holding aloft an old style lantern with a bright, modern, sixty watt bulb inside it. Well, yes, he thought, as Revere dismounted and tied his skittish horse to a metal, six foot T-post, that was an option. Julie could be the first person in McKinley in over a century to be trampled to death by a horse. Or...

There were so many deaths to choose from. Across the way a fat, red-faced barbeque chef was crying his wares from his kiosk.

"Ribs," he cried. "Polish sausage. Shish kebab. Get 'em while they're hot."

The chef hefted a large, raw slab of dripping ribs and laid it across a black, cut in half oil can barbeque grill. Kevin had a sudden vivid flashback to the slab of human ribs he had seen at the scene of the roller coaster crash. The smoky aroma of charring meat from the grill sent waves of powerful nausea through Kevin's belly, closing his throat and filling his mouth with a hot gush of metallic saliva. He squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated every ounce of effort he had on not puking.

When Kevin was able to open his eyes and swallow normally again, he looked back over at the barbeque chef. The fat man stood over his grill, a long, wicked, steel fork gripped in one hand. He wore a stained apron emblazoned with stylized flames and chilli peppers that read: "HOTTER THAN HELL!!!" Distorted behind the heat waves coming off the grill, he looked like some greasy, obese devil presiding over a lake of fire. The tines of the fork and the tips of the shish kebab skewers glinted menacingly in the twilight. As Kevin watched, the chef turned the knob of the portable propane tank under the grill. Death by impalement. Death by fire.

Next to him, a burly, bearded man dressed as a colonial blacksmith pounded on a white-hot horseshoe while holding it steady with iron forceps. Sparks flew and bounced and scattered all over the place,

dropping into the straw at his feet. His left foot pumped the bellows of a glowing forge. It roared like a dragon. Another death by fire.

Further down the way, two younger guys dressed as colonial militiamen were stacking heavy iron cannon balls into triangular stacks beside their field pieces. Behind them, a squad of uniformed soldiers marched in time to a young boy rapping out a beat on a drum. Each of the soldiers carried a gun, but Kevin had no idea if they were actual working firearms or just replicas. Their sergeant drew his razor-sharp sabre as he called out company halt. Death by cannon ball. Death by gunfire. Death by sword.

An eerie flapping sound like the beat of a giant bird's wings made Kevin spin around. A chubby Ben Franklin impersonator in a bad wig and granny glasses was paying out the string of a big kite while a crowd of onlookers craned their necks to watch it rise. Ben was standing next to a spherical contraption of glass, brass and steel. He grinned at his audience.

"Now," he said. "Let's hope for some lightning."

Death by electrocution. Kevin groaned.

"Great," he muttered. "Thanks, Ben."

He returned to scanning the crowd. Julie had to be there somewhere.

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Wendy slammed on the brakes of her truck as an old couple in a Buick in front of her came to a sudden stop. She was in the lot of the park where the Tri-Centennial celebration was being held, and it was jam packed with morons of every stripe. The old geezer in the Buick was apparently waiting for the lady in the mini-van to pull out of the space on the left, even though there were clearly more open spaces just a little further down the row. Wendy pounded the steering wheel. Now the lady in the mini-van was arguing with the kids in the back seat. She hadn't even started her car yet.

What a nightmare. Wendy had to get into the fair. She had to find Julie. She looked to the left and right. There wasn't enough room to get around the Buick so she laid on the horn, frustration building.

The old guy in the Buick ignored her, but the lady in the mini-van gave her a dirty look. Fine, whatever. As long as she got moving, she could give all the dirty looks in the world. The lady put her seat belt on with deliberate slowness, then backed carefully out of the space, and at last put her van in first and drove away. The old guy in the Buick signaled left, and then eased in with all the speed and caution of a space shuttle pilot docking with the MIR. Julie's hands white-knuckled the wheel. Were these more of Death's playful delaying tactics? Was it enjoying her torment, as it tossed one obstacle after another into her path?

The Buick finally edged into the parking space and Wendy roared ahead, then slammed on her brakes again as she nearly ran down an entire family dressed like pilgrims. There was an irony she didn't need. Killing five people on the way to saving her sister from imminent death. The pilgrims passed, cheerful and oblivious, and Wendy surged ahead again, then slewed into a parking space, stomped on the parking brake, and slammed out of her door.

As she hurried across the crowded parking lot, she remembered the car behind her, the song and the blacked out rearview mirror. She looked back over her shoulder. There were tons of cars, tons of people. She had no idea if one of them might be the one that had been following her. She ran on toward the bright lights of the fair.

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A pair of colonial soldiers walked past Kevin as he continued to scan the crowd. They were carrying flagpoles topped with large and ornate brass eagle finials. The poles had the banner of the McKinley Minutemen stretched between them: a coiled snake on a blood red background, with the motto "Liberty or Death" emblazoned upon it. As they marched up the low rise toward the drilling soldiers and the cannon, Kevin saw, partially obscured by the banner, three girls walking and flirting with three guys. He ducked his head to look under the banner. Success. The girl in the middle was Julie.

Kevin looked around to make sure nobody was about to rush the barricade, and then wove swiftly through the crowd toward the six

kids. Behind him, from the corner of a tent, officers Clark and Polanski watched him intently. Polanski pointed at Julie. Clark nodded.

Kevin stopped in front of the six kids. He felt a flush of embarrassment as he noticed that Julie was dressed in a very sexy outfit, a microscopic skirt and a sheer scrap of a top that accentuated rather than covered her abundant endowments. She was not wearing a bra. He fought to keep his eyes on her defiant face as he pointed to her, Amber and Perry.

"You three have to come with me," he said, hoping his voice sounded more authoritative than he felt.

"What for?" Julie asked. Kevin knew Julie could tell he was flustered by her braless display and was working it for all it was worth. She was hot and she knew it. She grinned and crossed her arms beneath her breasts, lifting them until they seemed to be straining towards him. "We didn't do nothing."

"Yeah," Perry echoed. "We didn't do nothing."

"Look," Kevin said keeping his gaze averted from Julie's nipples like they were the eyes of the Gorgon. "I'll explain that after you come with me, okay?"

"Well," Amber said. "We're not coming with you until you explain."

The three boys closed in around the girls, suddenly territorial. The tallest of the three was a good-looking kid with a wiseass smirk and a brown and orange trucker hat that read "Original Soul Brother," even though he was as white as Ian McKinley.

"Fuck off, rent a cop," he said. "They don't have to go nowhere with you."

His two underlings slapped hands and made toadying noises of agreement. Kevin ignored him, staying focused on Julie.

"It's for your own safety, Julie," Kevin said. "Can you please just trust me on this?"

"My..." Julie narrowed her eyes at him. "Is this some paranoid crap my sister put you up to? There aren't any stupid rides here, okay? I'm not going to have a fucking heart attack. I'm just walking around."

Unnoticed behind them as they argued, one of the colonial soldiers put a final cannon ball on top of a pyramid of shot and turned

around to build another one. While his back was turned, the weight of the top cannon ball pushed the three below it apart and it plopped down onto the grass, then rolled down the slope toward the fireworks mortars. It traveled under the plastic barricade and continued on toward the two wheeled, flatbed trailer with the double bank of mortars mounted on it. The fireworks technicians didn't notice it. They were too busy talking on their walkie-talkies and making final preparations for the big show.

"Ten seconds to go time," one of the technicians said.

"Roger," said another. "Primed and ready."

The cannonball slowed as the ground leveled and it began to lose impetus. It rolled slower and slower until it finally came to a stop, clunking against the metal rod that was propped under the flatbed and which held it steady. It wasn't a hard rap, but it was enough. The metal rod was knocked out of position and fell with a thump in the grass next to the cannon ball. Above it, the flatbed trailer teetered slightly downward in the direction of the crowd.

"This has got nothing to do with heart attacks," Kevin said. "You just have to trust me. You're in danger and I need to get you out of here."

"That's total bullshit, dude," the Original Soul Brother said. "You're just trying to mack on our chicks."

"Yeah," said one of the lesser boys.

Yeah, right," said the other. "You're, like, totally abusing your power, dude. Go find your own hook up."

"Seven seconds," said the fireworks technician.

Kevin ignored the boys and took Julie's arm. "Julie, please," he said. "Just come with me and I..."

"Get the fuck off me!" She yanked her arm away from him. "I'm not going anywhere."

Kevin made to grab her arm again. Unbeknownst to him, Officers Polanski and Clark had spotted the scuffle, exchanged a look, and started toward Kevin.

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Further down the path, Wendy was cutting through the crowd, head high, looking in every direction at once. She finally spotted Kevin, and then, as she focused on him, she also saw Julie.

"Kevin!" she shouted. "Julie!"

She started pushing faster through the crowd toward them, moving as quickly as she could, but before she was able to reach them, all the lights in the fair dimmed to black and a loud voice echoed from the public system.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a booming, friendly voice, "Welcome to the McKinley Tri Centennial Celebration Fireworks Extravaganza. And away we go!"

The crowd cheered, and people began surging for the picnic field to find seats. Wendy was jostled and knocked this way and that as the flow of the crowd suddenly reversed. She fought against the tide of bodies, stumbling over a kid in the dark, and cursing under her breath.

On the flatbed, an electronic match fired, and with a loud hiss, a firework rocketed out of a mortar tube and shot into the air. Following Newton's third law, which states that every action causes an equal and opposite reaction, the now unstable flatbed trailer tilted down under the pressure of the rocket's exhaust, and the bank of mortars lowered a few more inches toward the crowd on the path.

The firework exploded in the sky, blossoming into a glittering red, white and blue flower of fire, to the applause of the crowd. The scene lit up before Wendy in harsh black and white—Kevin trying to pull Julie away. Paul Revere's horse, tethered near Kevin and Julie, jerking skittishly and backing up at the noise, officers Clark and Polanski moving in like sharks. Then all was darkness again. She pushed forward, shouting but unheard.

One of the boys with Julie, Amber and Perry noticed the frightened horse, and nudged the others. He pulled an M80 firecracker out of his pocket and held it up. The Original Soul Brother grinned maliciously and nodded. The first boy lit the M80 and threw it under the horse's feet. It went off just as another firework went off overhead. The horse screamed and reared, then tried to bolt. The rope tethering him to the T-post pulled taut, then he yanked it out of

the ground. The horse charged through the crowd, as people threw themselves out of its way. The T-post bounced violently across the uneven ground, banging into people's shins and elbows. Two men tried to grab the horse's reins, but just then another firework exploded and the horse reared and reversed directions, heading back the way it had come.

Wendy dodged around a family that stood gawking in the center of the path, staring upward, slack jawed, at the fireworks bursting in the sky. She had almost reached Kevin and Julie. Julie was ripping her arm away from Kevin, furious, as Clark and Polanski got closer.

"Let me put it this way," Julie shouted at Kevin. "Maybe you'll be able to understand."

She raised the middle fingers of both hands to give him the double bird, glitter polished nails raised and tongue out.

Wendy sucked in a startled gasp. Julie had recreated exactly the image in the photo Wendy had taken of her at the amusement park that awful night. A firework erupted above them, illuminating the scene as if a flash bulb had gone off. Wendy felt the presence of death all around her.

"Julie. Look out," she screamed, just as Clark and Polanski took Kevin firmly by both arms, shouting in his ear over the whistling roar of the fireworks.

Julie clearly didn't hear her. Wendy hurried forward again, but the terrified horse charged past her, nearly knocking her flat. Clark and Polanski saw it coming and pulled Kevin out of the way and threw him down. Julie looked up and dived to the ground at the last second as Clark and Polanski tried to grab the horse. The horse reared, just like the image on Julie's T-shirt in her photo.

The horse raced past, easily dodging the cops. Julie raised herself up on her elbows and looked around. The T-post at the end of the horse's rope was bouncing toward her, point first. She ducked, and it spun over her head, but the rope caught her across the neck and wrapped around. Julie choked as she was jerked backward and dragged behind the horse.

"No!" Wendy screamed. "Julie. Kevin. Stop that horse!"

Kevin jumped to his feet and lunged for the horse, but another concussive firework went off, spooking the horse and causing it to change direction once again. The rope slackened around Julie's neck, and she raised her hand to pull the rope away, but before she could get it off, the horse charged away again, and the loop of rope tightened around her arm as well as her neck. The horse dragged her in this awkward position toward an exhibit of colonial farm tools. Screaming in pain and fear, Julie saw an antique hay bailer, all sharp meshing steel rods and heavy gears gaping like the mouth of an iron dragon.

"Julie!" Kevin cried. He turned and ripped the saber from a passing Minuteman's sheath. He raced after the horse, slashing down at the rope with the sword and chopping through it. Julie skidded to a stop only inches from the hay bailer's iron teeth. The horse plunged on, knocking colonial farmers left and right, and veered toward some tents. Julie gagged and choked, and tried to regain her breath.

The Minuteman ran after Kevin. "Hey, give that back," he shouted, gesturing to the sword.

Officers Clark and Polanski finally managed to get in the way of the horse. Clark caught the rope and Polanski caught the bridle, and they slowed the panicked horse, while behind him, Wendy, Amber and Perry ran to Julie and crowded around her. Kevin argued with the minuteman.

"Tie it off," Polanski said. "Our first priority is that kid."

Clark nodded and quickly lashed the horse to one of the poles that held up the "Liberty or Death" banner.

Wendy knelt beside Julie and lifted her head into her lap. "Julie," she said. "Are you okay?"

Julie's face was sweaty and pale with high, red blotches like theatrical rouge on her paper white cheeks. She clutched weakly at the left side of her chest, gasping.

"I need..." she whispered through clenched teeth. "Meds... My purse..."

"Shit," Wendy cursed, looking all around them. "Where's Julie's purse?"

"She must have dropped it," Amber said.

"Is it her heart?" Perry asked in a small, terrified voice.

"Yes," Wendy said, struggling to stay calm. "Run back to where you were standing and see if you can find her purse. Quickly now."

"Julie," Wendy said. "Stay with me kiddo. Come on, I need you to keep breathing."

She looked down at Julie's chest and saw she was wearing her heart shaped necklace with the FIGHTER side facing up. Julie's eyes were glassy, unfocused.

"Come on! Come on! Come on! Come on!" Wendy said, panic, fear and frustration all piling up inside her. "Julie, be a fighter, I need you to..."

Another firework exploded directly overhead, drowning out the end of her sentence.

Behind her, the horse reared and charged again, trying to get away from the frightening sounds. The flagpole bent like a bow as the horse pulled on the rope, then as the pressure became too much, it ripped out of the ground and launched like a javelin past the horse, banner fluttering behind it like a wing.

Perry appeared at that moment, triumphant with Julie's tacky, pink, plastic purse.

"I found it," she said. "Julie, Wendy, I found the purse!"

Wendy did not get a chance to respond. Before she could open her mouth, something flashed through the air behind Perry's shoulder. Suddenly, a brass eagle erupted from Perry's sternum, spackling Julie and Wendy with blood and bits of bone. The eagle's wings were caked with gore and spongy lung tissue. Blood dripped from the pointed tip of the decorative finial.

Perry gaped down at the metal sticking out of her body, tottering on her knees as her bodily functions began to shut down. The pink purse slipped from her fingers and fell into the bloody dirt.

"Oh, Julie," she said. "It..."

She collapsed sideways and sprawled on the grass, the flag draping over her. Blood began to soak through the words "Liberty or Death."

Wendy stared at Perry's body, horrified as this latest brutality dovetailed perfectly into the deadly pattern. An eagle and a flag, just like the design on her T-shirt in the photo. Wendy shook her head

and snapped herself forcibly out of it. Reaching for the gore-slicked purse, she fumbled with the catch and began frantically sorting through the mess inside. Julie was always so disorganized. Wendy tossed aside gum and lipstick, Julie's cellphone (uncharged, of course), pens and scraps of paper, crumpled receipts and keys, and a single condom in a bright foil wrapper.

Condom? Wendy couldn't help but think. Why would Julie need a condom?

Finally, at the very bottom of the bag, Wendy's fingers found the orange plastic vial that held Julie's emergency meds. She pawed at the childproof cap, struggling to open the damn thing until finally it popped open, spilling the jaunty, candy-colored pills in the grass around her knees. She scrabbled in the dirt for one and then another and forced them between Julie's bluish lips.

"Swallow," Wendy said. "Come on, you need your meds, Julie."

Julie obediently dry swallowed the pills and for a few moments, the two of them were alone in the still eye of the storm.

"Are you okay?" Wendy asked, stroking Julie's sweaty hair.

Julie didn't respond. Her breathing was returning to normal, but she couldn't take her eyes from the eagle protruding from her friend's chest.

"Julie," Wendy said again, shaking her sister. "Look at me."

Julie turned her head to look up into Wendy's face and gripped Wendy's hand. For all her sexy clothes and make-up, and her precocious attitude, she looked exactly like she had when she was five, getting ready to be wheeled in for a new round of surgeries and clutching at Wendy's fingers.

"What the hell is happening?" Julie asked.

"It's complicated," Wendy said. "Listen to me. I know you were on Devil's Flight with us that night. I'm not mad about that now, but I need to know—Perry was on the ride with you, wasn't she? It's extremely important."

Julie looked up at her, confused. "What does that matter now?" Julie asked. "She... Wendy, she's dead. Perry's dead!"

"I know, Julie," Wendy replied. "I know. And I'm sorry, but please, answer the question. It's important."

Julie looked very close to complete hysterical disintegration, but Wendy could see her trying to focus.

"Yes," she admitted finally. "We got on the roller coaster, then got off when you started screaming about stuff."

Wendy clenched her fists, air hissing between her teeth. Perry was part of the order, but what did it mean? Was she supposed to die before or after Julie? Had Kevin saved Julie from her fate? It certainly seemed like it. Or was Julie next? Or was Kevin... She looked up suddenly. Where was Kevin? She craned her neck and scanned the area, suddenly terribly afraid for him.

The fairground was washed with brilliant, colorful light again as more fireworks exploded across the sky, and she saw Kevin, Polanski and Clark dancing around the maddened white horse as they tried to catch its rope again.

Amber stumbled over to Julie, a blank look of shock across her simple features.

"Julie... Perry... Oh my God."

Wendy grabbed Amber's arm and pulled her down beside them.

"Stay with Julie," Wendy hissed. "Kevin," she cried, jumping up and racing toward him. "Be careful."

Kevin didn't hear her. He made a lunge for the rope, but the horse turned away from him, bucking and shooting out its hind legs. An iron-shod hoof caught Kevin square in the chest and kicked him back five yards, lifting him completely off his feet. Kevin crashed into the barbeque tent, flattening a folding table piled high with plates and utensils, and sending them flying in every direction as he rolled to a stop next to the grill. A barbeque fork spun through the air and punctured the fuel line of the propane tank under the flaming grill. Propane sprayed everywhere.

The grill and everything around it burst into flames, setting the fat, sweating cook on fire. Kevin's face was brightly lit as it reflected the flames. He looked terrified, almost exactly like he had when Wendy had taken his picture at the amusement park. He sucked unsuccessfully for air, but the horse's kick had collapsed one of his lungs and he couldn't fill it. His arms and legs would not obey him as

he tried to make them work in coordination and get himself away from there.

Bits of burning paper plates floated down toward the open fuel line. Kevin's eyes widened. It was going to blow. He tried again to struggle to his feet. He managed, but his head was spinning so bad he wasn't able to walk more than a few short steps. The fuel line began to shoot flame. Someone grabbed the back of his security jacket and hauled him back. It was Wendy. He was so glad to see her alive and well that he forgot all about the pain in his chest. He was shocked when she threw her arms around him, and felt a hot sheet of pain flair up as she yanked him down on top of her. Behind them the propane tank erupted in a ball of blue-white flame. Kevin and Wendy rolled away from the flames, barely escaping the edges of the deadly explosion. The tank shot off at an angle like a rocket, missing Kevin by inches.

Wendy and Kevin continued to roll away, hair and clothes smoking. When they came to a stop, Wendy sat up slowly and looked around. Her hair was crisped on one side. The barbeque tent was on fire and the cook was rolling on the ground, trying to put himself out. On the other side of the path Clark and Polanski had recaptured the escaped horse and were lashing it to a sturdy lamp post. Julie was curled up in a fetal position beside Amber, covering her head and weeping. Amber was patting her back over and over like a broken robot, staring off into space with unseeing eyes.

"Come on, Kevin," Wendy said, looking at him. "We have to get Julie and get the hell out of here."

But Kevin was barely listening. He was staring up at the sky, his eyes glazed, wheezing like an asthmatic old man. His face was singed. He had blisters on his left cheek. His hair was smoking. His hand was pressed to his chest.

"Kevin?" Wendy asked. "Kevin, are you okay?"

"Just... just need to catch... my breath," he said. "Christ, that hurts."

"Hang on Kevin," Wendy said. "I'll see if I can find a paramedic for you, and for Julie."

She craned her neck, looking around again. People were rushing away from the burning barbeque tent now. Others, official men in uniforms, were rushing towards it. Still others were simply staring at it, their attention pulled away from the fireworks in the sky by the earthbound explosion.

"Can somebody help us?" she cried, reluctant to leave Kevin's side. "Can somebody get a paramedic?"

Nobody looked her way. Everyone was focused on the blazing tent. Everyone except...

A figure in the center of the crowd was staring right at her. She focused on him, reaching out her arm. It was Ian McKinley. His eyes were wild with reflected fire. Wendy's arm dropped. She frowned at him, confused. Why was he staring at her like that? He took a step toward her. Had it been Ian who followed her? Suddenly she was horribly sure it had been.

"Kevin?" she said, looking down, filled with dread and unease.

"Yeah, I'm good," said Kevin. "Let's go."

He tried to push himself up, but his arms wouldn't support his weight.

Wendy turned toward Julie and Amber. Julie was sitting up now and Amber was getting to her feet.

"Amber. Julie," she called. "Help me. Kevin needs help."

Julie looked up at her with wide, wet eyes. "What's happening?" she sobbed. "Why is everything going crazy?"

"I'll explain it once we get out of here, I promise," she said. "Amber, help me get Kevin on his feet. We have to go."

Julie staggered to her feet and leaned against a tent pole while Amber stumbled over to them. The redheaded girl took Kevin's left arm as Wendy took his right, and they hauled him up. Kevin blinked around, dazed, trying to focus his eyes. He frowned.

"What is McKinley doing here?" he slurred. "He hates his family and everything about this town."

Wendy froze, and almost let go of Kevin. "McKinley," she said. "Oh my God. McKinley. Of course!"

Kevin wove on his feet and nearly fell. Wendy clutched him again and got his arm over her shoulder.

"We need to leave here now," she said. Her voice was sharp and hard. "Julie, come on!"

Kevin turned to look at her, blinking and confused. "Huh?" he asked. "What's the deal?"

Wendy whispered in his ear. "Ian followed me," she said. "In my picture. The one where I'm standing with Jason, we are wearing the McKinley grad night shirts. The way Jason's hand is on my shoulder it looks like he's pointing to the word McKinley. Ian McKinley."

Kevin's mouth dropped open. "Holy shit," he said. "Come on. Let's move. The first aid station, there'll be security."

He leaned forward and Wendy and Amber guided him down the path while Julie followed. close behind. Ian watched them, and changed his course to pace them. They moved slowly down the slope toward the fireworks launch area and the security tent beyond.

Julie frowned as she struggled to keep up with Wendy, Amber and Kevin.

"What are you guys talking about?" she asked. "McKinley grad night shirt? I don't get it."

"It's a long story," Wendy said over her shoulder, talking loudly over the constant explosions of the fireworks. "It sounds goofy as hell, but haven't you noticed how everybody who got off Devil's Flight before it crashed has died. In order?"

Julie's eyes went blank as she thought about it, then they widened as she was hit by a realization.

"And I was on the roller coaster," she cried. "Next to Perry. That means I'm..."

Wendy shook her head. "Maybe not," she said. "It looks like Kevin saved you. You might be safe."

"Then you saved Kevin," Julie said. She stopped walking suddenly, and Amber stopped too, almost toppling Kevin. Julie stared at Wendy, eyes growing huge in her still too pale face. "But, that means you... you..."

"That means I'm next," Wendy said. "Right. And the other half of the weirdness is the pictures I took that night. They all seem to give clues on how the people in the pictures are going to die. Ashley and Ashlyn looked like they were on fire in theirs. Lewis looked like his

head was going to be crushed. Frank had a fan that looked like it was slicing through his neck. Kevin's photo was all over exposed like a bomb went off in his face..."

"And you were wearing a McKinley T-shirt," said Julie, getting it. "With Jason pointing to the name KcKinley. Oh my God."

"What are we talking about, kids?" asked Ian, appearing beside them suddenly. He sounded as cheerful as a kindergarten teacher, but there was a demented glint in his eyes.

Kevin glared at him. "Get the fuck out of here, McKinley," he shouted over the noise. "I've had more than enough of your shit for one night."

Ian made a shocked face. "What? Have I offended?" he asked, with mock sincerity. "I'm just here to celebrate our beloved town's Tri-Centennial, like the rest of our happy citizens."

"You followed me," Wendy said, eyes narrow and hard.

"Who? Moi?" Ian said. "You're getting paranoid." He laughed, a nasty sound. "Of course, I guess you've got reason to be. I saw everything that happened just now, and you're next, aren't you? Kevin saved your sister. You saved Kevin. So your number's up, isn't it? You're the end of it. When you're gone, it's done. Unless somebody saves you."

"I thought you said you didn't believe me," Wendy said bitterly.

"Seeing is believing," Ian replied. "Twenty nails through Erin's face was pretty fucking convincing." The veins in his neck were pulsing.

"Well if you believe me," she said, "you have to stay away from me."

"Yeah, asshole," Kevin said, voice more breathless than badass. "Beat it."

"I have to stay away from you?" Ian said, frowning. "Who died and made you Death's stage manager? Why do I...?" He paused, as a realization struck him. "Wait a minute. Do I... Do I cause your death? No way." He laughed hysterically. "Well, isn't that poetic justice? Isn't that just a perfect fucking circle?" He snarled at Wendy. "Tit for tat, right, eye for an eye. I cause your death, the way you caused Erin's!"

They all jumped as three mortars fired right next to them, fireworks whooshing up into the sky. They had reached the plastic barricades that had been Kevin's post before all the chaos had begun. None of them noticed that the flatbed trailer was angling down a little more every time one of its mortars fired.

Ian shouted as the fireworks exploded overhead. "Was I in one of your visions, Wendy? What did you see?"

Wendy tried desperately to ignore him. She looked forward, toward the first aid station, only twenty yards ahead. Paramedics and security officers were carrying Perry's body, and the body of the burned cook inside, while others with minor injuries waited outside. Wendy thought of shouting to the guards for help, but they wouldn't hear her over all the explosions. She kept walking, doggedly urging Kevin forward.

Ian looked ahead and saw where they were heading. He stepped in front of them, blocking their path. Amber gasped and stepped back, letting go of Kevin. Wendy staggered as Kevin's full weight hit her, but she bore it up, angry now, chin up and defiant.

"Was I in one of your magic photos, Wendy?" Ian asked. "Was I in your photo? Was I in front of a tent?"

Wendy veered Kevin to the right, angling away from the fireworks launch area as Amber and Julie tried to edge around Ian.

He shuffled in front of them again, laughing.

"Come on, Wendy," Ian said. "Isn't this exciting? Isn't the tension killing you? Don't you want to finish it? Just tell me how I start it off. Let's..." His moment of villainous menace was marred somewhat when a clump of loose Mylar balloons bumped into him and hugged his face. He batted them angrily away. "Goddamn it. Let's get it over with!"

Most of the jaunty balloons drifted behind him, bobbing over the plastic barricade and then drooping and rolling across the ground toward the flatbed mounted mortars. One hung around Wendy's legs like a needy puppy.

"It'll be over if you just stay away from me," Wendy said, pleading. "Then it'll all be over and none of us will have to worry anymore."

The Mylar balloons bumped against the flatbed trailer. A gust of wind pushed them up and they bounced toward the electronic matches. The matches were bare wires screwed into a plank, with simple open switches waiting for a pulse of electricity to complete the circuit and light the fuse. One of the balloons landed lightly on both sides of one switch, and the silver coating of the Mylar balloon closed the circuit. Sparks flew, popping the balloons, and a fuse lit.

"It's already over for me," Ian said. "It skipped me. I'm not dying, but I don't want it to be over for you."

"You're sick," Wendy said, grimacing. "I didn't do anything to you."

Flames belched from the largest mortar on the flatbed. Wendy jumped and looked behind her. The forlorn Mylar balloon blocked her view, and then floated in front of her. She pushed at it, annoyed, and froze as she saw in its mirror finish the reflection of herself standing, with Kevin draping his arm over her shoulder. She recognized the pose, but where from? It struck her. She had been standing in exactly the same pose with Jason in her grad night picture. A shiver of nauseous dread ran through her. Her death was near, it had to be, but where?

The force of the big firework's exhaust at last unbalanced the flat bed completely, and it tipped down to the ground like a seesaw. The heavy mortar frame slid down the incline and tipped over until the mortar tubes were parallel with the ground, and the openings were pointing right at Wendy, Kevin, Amber and Julie's backs. The flaccid Mylar balloons settled across all the electronic matches on the board. Sparks flew. And all the remaining fuses lit at once.

Wendy turned at the hiss of the fuses, just in time to see four mortar tubes erupt with flame, launching fireworks straight at her. She screamed and dropped, dragging Kevin and Julie with her. They collapsed in a pile on the grass as the four rockets screamed over them, cascading sparks, and shot directly at Ian. He froze in shock, eyes wide, but at the last second, the fireworks veered up and arced into the sky, missing him by inches.

Wendy, Kevin and Julie looked up, amazed to see Ian still standing. Down near the security tent, Clark and Polanski looked up

at the sudden noise and light.

Ian remained motionless for a moment, deeply unnerved by his close call, but then he relaxed and grinned, pointing a triumphant finger at Wendy.

"See?" he said, cackling maliciously. "See? I'm not going to die. It's you, Wendy. You're next. You're dead!"

The four fireworks exploded together next to the towering cherry picker crane holding the large McKinley Tri-Centennial sign high over Ian's head. The blast shered the cable holding the cherry picker's basket, over which the sign was draped, and the basket dropped, straight toward Ian. He looked up and raised his hands over his head, wrists crossing in the shape of an X.

The basket hit him square in the forehead and pile-drove him into the ground. Blood welled up around the frame of the basket, which had buried itself two feet deep into the soft earth. One of Ian's pale hands poked limply out from the side of the basket until the sign fluttered down and covered it, the word McKinley marking Ian's final resting place in yard high letters.

Wendy, Kevin and Julie got slowly to their feet, staring at yet another gruesome accident and edging away. Amber was edging back and then suddenly bolted away into the crowd. As Wendy stepped back, her foot hit something hard. She looked down. The yearbook camera that Julie had borrowed earlier lay at her feet. She picked it up as warily as if picking up a tarantula.

Julie looked at it and flinched. "I didn't take any pictures. I swear!" she said. "I'll take it back Monday."

Wendy hesitated, then shook her head. She threw it down again and stomped on it. It cracked and bent with a snapping of plastic and metal as she ground it under her heel.

"Forget it," Wendy said. "It's broken."

Julie nodded and exchanged a half smile with her sister.

"Good fucking riddance," Kevin said.

Wendy looked at him and slipped under his arm again. "You all right?" she asked.

He nodded as Julie tucked under his other arm and they limped forward. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be fine as long as you're fine."

Everything's under control now, Wendy. It's over."

As they limped toward the first aid tent, a pair of paramedics hurried toward them, and Clark and Polanski ran toward the cherry picker basket and Ian's body. Wendy breathed a sigh of relief. The feeling of foreboding was gone. The nightmare was over. Kevin was right. Everything was under control again. All she had to worry about from now on was plain old ordinary life.

A sudden, bright white light flashed behind her. She paused and looked back. The crushed camera's lens winked at her. The electronic flash was fading to red.

Her blood ran cold. This couldn't be happening. It was over. Everybody that got off the roller coaster had already had their brush with death, and either died or survived. It had skipped her and Julie and Kevin and... and...

A sudden horrible realization nearly stopped her heart. Ian had thought it skipped him, but he had died after all, hands up in the shape of an X, just like in his photo. Maybe it didn't skip anyone. Maybe the order of deaths was still preserved. She thought back to what Ian had said in the Home Land warehouse. There was no reason to think that the people on the roller coaster had died in the exact order they were sitting. Some of them might have hung on for a few seconds or even minutes before their hearts stopped and their higher brain functions ceased. Even though Perry was sitting behind Ian and Erin, Ian might have hung on just a little bit longer, long enough to have breathed his last just seconds after she did. And if that was the case, then Julie and Kevin and Wendy were still fair game. Worse, they no longer had any idea who was going to die first. It could be any one of them.

It wasn't over after all.